

The Most Important Question:

Good morning!

It's nice to be back, for what will be my 7th sermon here. If you're thinking it seems like I was just up here preaching on "Healing the World and Ourselves," it seems like that to me, too. But that was a year ago. And though I did not volunteer for this again so soon, I did say yes when asked, because I wanted the opportunity to continue to sort out some important questions for myself.

In fact, I've immodestly titled this sermon "The Most Important Question." And that is the question posed at the top of your order of service and that Christy has already addressed: Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

The poem Christy read by Richard Gilbert, to savor the world or to save it refers to a famous quote by E. B. White, which goes

"If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it difficult to plan the day."

That has been one of my favorite quotes for a long time, capturing a central dilemma that many of us struggle with. But reflecting on it now, at age 58, I wonder that I never noticed that a third possibility had been left out, one I seem to find increasingly appealing as I get older. As one of my all-time heroes Pete Seeger put it in his song, "My get up and go has got up and went,"

I get up each morning and dust off my wits
Open the paper and read the obits
If I'm not there, I know I'm not dead
So I eat a good breakfast and go back to bed.

So going back to or staying in bed is another option for E. B. White and all of us. Indeed, I have to admit that I enjoy napping more than ever as I get older. It's one of my guilty pleasures. It's one of my favorite activities on weekends and on vacations.

I did a report on Ben Franklin in High School, and one of his sayings was "Up, sluggard, and waste not life! In the grave will be sleeping enough!" And

sometimes I hear Franklin admonishing me when I am lingering too long in bed. But on the other hand, I'm sure when I'm dead I won't ENJOY sleeping nearly as much as I do now!

So maybe we can put sleeping in the "savor" life category, since it can be enjoyable (and as all the new parents and insomniacs out there will attest), its lack can be miserable. I'll point out that compared with many other ways to savor life, it is inexpensive and has a very low carbon footprint! And it's a great to do with someone you love!

But of course if you all had stayed in bed, you wouldn't be here. Thanks for coming. I hope I can keep you awake, and if I can't, that you savor your nap.

Before we leave the topic of sleep, I do want to point out that I have found that some of the things I am most proud of accomplishing were things I did when I was very tired. There is something about pushing ourselves to the limit for something we believe in – whether it is caring for a sick child or finishing a sermon or a grant that, at least for me, provides an extra level of satisfaction. A related observation is the irony that even though I continue to seek out such experiences, when I am in the midst of doing some of things that I find most fulfilling, I can't wait for them to be over. I love taking care of newborns, but as soon as I start one of my weeks attending in the nursery I begin counting the days until it will be over. I guess the key is having an end-date.

What about the awake time? What about the save or savor the world dilemma?

In the save the world category, for some reason I have been drawn to very large and rather abstract issues. As many of you know, I've been active in Physicians for Social Responsibility for many years. PSR's mission is to educate the public about catastrophic threats to human survival. For many years, that meant nuclear weapons, and in fact nuclear weapons have been a major concern of mine since I learned what they were and what they could do. They were the topic of my third (and arguably most depressing) sermon here in honor of Hiroshima day in 2005. But in the last 10 years or so PSR has also focused on global climate change, the topic of my sermon here last year.

A few months ago, one of my PSR colleagues forwarded a less-than-cheery 2013 article by Paul and Ann Ehrlich from the biology department down the road at Stanford, titled, "Can a collapse of global civilization be avoided?" The short answer is, maybe, but it doesn't look good.

The Ehrlichs cite ecological footprint analyses that show that to sustainably support *today's* population as we currently live would require 1.5 planets earth; if all 7 billion people consumed resources at the US level, it would require 5 or 6 earths. Add to this the fact that the population is projected to increase by another 2.5 billion by 2050 even as key aquifers are almost dry and global climate change threatens to dry out or inundate much of the planet, and, as the saying goes, "Houston, (and the rest of earth) we have a problem."

The Ehrlichs also cite the work of Jared Diamond on the collapse of societies. I feel a special connection to Jared because I knew his father, a pediatric hematologist. Anyway, Diamond uses a 5-point framework to understand the collapse of civilizations: 1) Environmental degradation; 2) Climate change; 3 and 4) Relations with friendly unfriendly neighbors; and 5) How society responds, especially whether leadership elites face conflicts between their own short-term interests and the changes needed for their society to survive.

The Ehrlichs point out that current environmental threats are global in nature, threatening the whole planet rather than individual societies. So, in fact, there are no neighbors, friendly or unfriendly who might change our fate – we are it. And unfortunately, our leadership elites seem unwilling or unable to deal with this problem.

In his TED talk on the topic, Diamond draws an analogy between people on earth and bacteria on a culture plate. The population of bacteria doubles every 30 minutes for multiple generations until slightly more than half of the space or available nutrients have been used up. Then 1 more generation and the capacity of the plate is exceeded and BOOM they all die. That's the thing about exponential growth. That very last doubling adds as many as all previous doublings combined.

So, in short, we have a perfect storm of overpopulation, environmental degradation and dominant power elites whose short term interests

service our overconsumption of natural resources. And let's not forget the thousands of nuclear weapons available to throw into the mix when things get unstable or desperate.

It reminded me of a quote from Woody Allen, that I almost included as one of the readings:

"More than any time in history mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to utter hopelessness and despair, the other to total extinction. Let us hope we have the wisdom to choose correctly."

So what DO we do? Without in any way deprecating or dismissing the concrete actions each of us can and should take to reduce our environmental footprint and steer our country and the world to a more sustainable future, I feel like it is important for me to acknowledge the real possibility (if not overwhelming likelihood) that we have passed the so-called tipping point, and that some very tough times are ahead no matter what we do.

I see an analogy with how we all must come to terms our own deaths. We become very attached to this life, but much as we might wish otherwise, we know that it is going to end.

Quoting Woody Allen again: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality by not dying!"

Unfortunately, that is not a choice we have. In some circles it is taboo to talk about death –it's something none of us much wants to think about. Indeed, in some cultures people will hide or refuse to talk about a terminal illness with someone who is dying.

But I don't favor that approach. I think it deprives the dying person of the ability to share fears and connect with loved ones when the need for those connections is greatest. And I think a beloved community like this one is one in which we need to be able to face and share our deepest fears and how we are trying to deal with them – because a sorrow shared is a sorrow diminished.

So that's what I'm doing now. I hope it works and is OK with you.

I've found comfort in the existentialist view that although there is a great deal over which we have

no control, we can control what sort of person we choose to be and how we choose to respond to the absurd and sometimes awful catastrophes that come our way. Yes, we may be aboard the Titanic, but we still can choose to play our violins to the end.

I have also found comfort, as Christy has, in trying to acknowledge and fully accept our insignificance in the vastness of space-time. I want to thank Diana Chung for suggesting this perspective when we had our workshop on climate change with Reverend Earl Koteen last year. Our little planet orbits a sun that is one of about 200 billion stars in the Milky Way, which is one of about 200 billion galaxies in the universe. How many is 200 billion? It's a hard number to grasp. If we take 200 billion times the width of a human hair (about a tenth of a millimeter), that would be the distance from here to Madagascar, which it turns out is about as far as you can get from San Mateo on planet earth.

And even if we do everything right, and we and our descendants all got to live to be 100 years old, we'd still only get to experience one 140 millionth of time so far. You've probably heard these analogies before: if all of time were compressed into a single year, and the big bang happened at midnight on January 1, then the sun and planets didn't form until August, multicellular organisms until November, and the first vertebrates and land plants arrived in mid-December. Modern humans would arrive at 6 minutes before midnight, writing would be developed at 15 seconds before midnight, and my own little slice of time amounts to about a tenth of a second of that year. Blink and it's over.

I recently finished a great book about science, called "A short history of nearly everything," by Bill Bryson. This may seem strange, but besides the comfort from our relative insignificance, I've found the various possible doomsday scenarios that have nothing to do with human activity strangely comforting as well.

We are currently in the midst of the earth's 6th great extinction period. Although this one is largely being triggered by human activity, the fact that it is the 6th means that great extinctions have happened 5 times before when it wasn't our fault.

The last one, which led to the extinction of the dinosaurs, appears to have been triggered by the KT meteor, which struck earth with the force of 100

million megatons. As Bryson writes, "Such an outburst is not easily imagined, but as James Lawrence Powell has pointed out, if you exploded a Hiroshima-sized bomb for every person alive on earth today, you would still be about a billion bombs short of the size of the KT impact."¹

Bryson has a nice way of helping us think about the danger of meteors:

Think of the Earth's orbit as a kind of freeway on which we are the only vehicle, but which is crossed regularly by pedestrians who don't know enough to look before stepping off the curb. At least 90 percent of these pedestrians are quite unknown to us. We don't know where they live, what sort of hours they keep, how often they come our way. All we know is that at some point, at uncertain intervals, they trundle across the road down which we are cruising at 66,000 miles an hour...

Altogether it is thought ... that some two thousand asteroids big enough to imperil civilized existence regularly cross our orbit. But even a small asteroid – the size of a house or so – could destroy a city. The number of these relative tiddlers in Earth-crossing orbits is almost certainly in the hundreds of thousands and possibly in the millions, and they are nearly impossible to track. The first one wasn't spotted until 1991, and that was after it had already gone by."

You get the picture. Closer to home, Bryson writes about the ticking time bomb that happens to be one of my favorite places on the planet, Yellowstone National Park.

"The Yellowstone eruption of two million years ago put out enough ash to bury New York State to a depth of sixty-seven feet or California to a depth of twenty. ... All of this was hypothetically interesting until 1973, when ... geologists did a survey and discovered that a large area of the park had developed an ominous bulge. ...

The geologists realized that only one thing could cause this—a restless magma chamber. Yellowstone wasn't the site of an ancient supervolcano; it was the site of an active one. It was also at about this time that they were able to work

¹ Bryson, B. A Short History of Nearly Everything. NY: Broadway Books, 2003. p. 345

out that the cycle of Yellowstone's eruptions averaged one massive blow every 600,000 years. The last one interestingly enough was 630,000 years ago. Yellowstone, it appears, is due." (pp 224-8)

To summarize, as Bryson puts it, "Only one thing is certain. We live on a knife edge." (p.432.)

So sooner or later (and it might be very soon) not only will we all die, but pretty much everything we hold precious might be gone, possibly forever, or possibly just for a few thousand or million years. How does that help us with the question I posed at the beginning about how we should spend our time?

Well, first, I'm taking more to heart the quote I first heard here from Jerry Motto, that I repeated in my last sermon:

"Please do not feel personally, totally, irrevocably responsible for everything. That's my job. Love, God."

We have all the more reason to savor the world because no matter what we do, not only we, but also it, may not be around much longer. Just as our own mortality should make us savor our own lives more, so the vulnerability and finite lifespan of civilization the earth as we know it should make us savor it all the more.

What about the saving? I was eating lunch last year with my friend Steve, and he said something like, "Tom, you've done 100 times what I have to try to rid the world of nuclear weapons, but what have you actually accomplished?"

And I am glad to have a relationship with Steve that he felt comfortable asking me that question, because it's a good one. And my answer is that I don't have illusions about accomplishing much or saving the world. There's an awful lot over which I have no control.

But one thing I do have control over is what sort of person I choose to be. And for now, I choose to be a person who tries to raise awareness and do something about problems that seem important, while at the same time fully aware of the limitations of my contributions.

Along those same lines, I harbor no illusions about the impact of my various lifestyle choices – from avoiding meat and airplane travel to driving a Leaf – on the health and well-being of the planet and its other species. The effects are most likely immeasurably trivial. So it's really more about who I choose to be and what feels to me the right way to live than it is about saving the world.

In a way, the save/savor distinction is artificial anyway, as Richard Gilbert and Christy have suggested. Part of how I savor the world is by feeling connection to it, and part of how I feel connection is living in a way that reflects that connection.

So at least for now I'll keep giving the climate change lectures, riding the bicycle and eating the lentils, joyfully tossing my few little starfish back into the water. Because that's partly how I choose to savor the world. Even the lentils – Johannah makes great lentils! And who knows, maybe I will make more of a difference than I know.

I'll close with a quote from Robert Kennedy that I shared at Kay McCann's memorial service:

"Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

May it be so.

And in the meantime, we can sing.