***IN SIX WORDS***

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Texts: Ecclesiastes 3:1-2a, 11a and Philippians 1:12-30

In an article for *Life & Work*, Scottish pastor Ron Ferguson raises a profound question for us to ponder: *How would you sum up your life so far in a six-word message?* He cites the Gaelic inscription on the tombstone of Spike Milligan as offering one man’s final response to that question: ***I told you I was ill***. But he also notes a variety of responses received by an online American magazine when that question was posed to readers. Among them was the ever grateful, ***Run over twice, thankfully still alive***, and the seemingly surprised, ***Not Quite What I was Planning***, which became the title for a book. Ferguson writes that his own response to that question arose from an incident at a nursing home early in his ministry in Glasgow. This is how he describes it:

*I quite fancied myself as a vocalist and guitarist, and my top number was ‘The House of the Rising Sun.’ I sang it in what I thought was a rather haunting, moving way. At the end of my performance, there was complete silence. People, I assumed, were overwhelmed by the beauty of the rendition. I waited for the standing ovation – or at least a seated ovation, as most of the people were in wheelchairs. Finally the increasingly tense silence was broken by one old crone, who cried: “Nivver mind, son, ye did yer best.” Six words plus a bonus for compassion.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

**Never mind, ye did yer best**. Would you claim that answer as your own to this point in your life, or do you have another response to that question: How would you sum up your life in just six words?

If Paul were to answer that question at the time he wrote his letter to the Philippians from prison, he might have chosen something like: **Jailed for Jesus, Praise the Lord!** What Roman authorities had intended as punishment to silence him proved instead to be a platform from which the Gospel was spreading. Prison guards were listening to the story of Jesus and expressing belief. Brothers and sisters in the Christian community were inspired by Paul’s example to boldly share the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection without fear of the consequences. The vacuum created by Paul’s imprisonment was being filled by a host of voices who were sharing the Gospel and finding receptive ears. Far from silencing the Jesus movement, Paul’s imprisonment was advancing the Gospel.

Not all those who were preaching the Gospel were doing so out of purely unselfish motives. Some saw Paul’s imprisonment as an opportunity to move up the leadership ladder and take his place. One might expect Paul to speak out against those with such motives, to claim his place as leader of the church despite his imprisonment and denounce his competitors. But for Paul it was all good. It didn’t matter that some were motivated by envy of his position or rampant ambition; the message itself – the resurrection of Jesus Christ – was being faithfully proclaimed and that was all that mattered. There is no suggestion that the message itself was being corrupted – where that was happening in other places Paul was quick to denounce it – but he believed that spreading the good news of Jesus was more important than the motives of any of those speakers who spread it. God was at work in his imprisonment, both within the walls and outside of them, and thus he had reason to rejoice despite the chains that bound him. **Jailed for Jesus, Praise the Lord!**

Are you able to see the silver linings in the clouds that hang over you from time to time, as Paul did? Or are you so caught up in your own situation that you miss the good things God is doing in and around you? God does not say, “No bad things will happen to God’s faithful people.” They do. A hurricane blows in, flood waters rise, cancer strikes, a child dies, a saint is wrongfully jailed. Bad things happen to good people, not because God wills it, but because God created a world in which there is free will on the part of humans and forces of nature that are constructive but may also be destructive at times. God does not control it all like a puppet master; nor did God create it all and then abandon us. God is at work in the world, not controlling but guiding, sustaining and saving. In the midst of suffering God is still at work, offering comfort and strength to those who suffer, inspiring hope in otherwise desperate situations, and bringing blessings out of the disaster – whatever the disaster may be. It is rare for us to recognize such blessings in the midst of suffering, as Paul did; often it is only after the fact that we see what God was doing and find reason to give God thanks and praise. At such times the six words that sum up your life might be: ***Silver Linings in the Clouds. Alleluia!***

Paul might have echoed those words, but he also wrestled with his role in God’s plan and the future ahead of him. It is a refrain I have heard frequently among some of our older folks. Why am I still here when I am ready to die? What is my purpose in living? I remember one woman who declined a minor medical procedure that would have helped to heal her; she said that if God wanted her to get better then she’d get better, but if not, she was ready to die. To her surprise, she got better without the procedure and was mad as a hornet at God, because she didn’t die as she had hoped. True to her feisty spirit, she then was anxious to get started with rehab so she could get on with living – God wasn’t done with her yet!

***Live or die, hard to choose!*** That might have been Paul’s six-word summation of his wrestling there in prison. “To me, living is Christ and dying is gain,” he wrote. Believing God’s resurrection promises in Christ he looked forward to that day when he would no longer be imprisoned, ridiculed, oppressed, or afflicted, but would be with Christ, embraced in the eternal love of God. “That is far better,” he said. But he also recognized that God was not done with him yet. There was more to be done for the Gospel here on earth, more to be done for the brothers and sisters in Christ among whom he served, more to be done as a living ambassador for Christ whether in prison or as a free man. And because that work was still to be done, he embraced it and so handed down to us a legacy of faith to which we are heirs.

***Live or die, hard to choose!*** The choice is not ours to make, but it is ours to make peace with. *Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.* Those words of Paul guide our days. We need not fear death, for God’s promises in Christ are hope-filled, glorious promises of resurrection and life in the loving presence of God. But neither should we fear living, for God is with us and is able to do in us and through us far more than we might imagine, regardless of the circumstance. Our calling, our vocation, is to live fully and faithfully as best we can each day, and leave the rest to God.

June Traeger was like a grandmother to me. She died about a year ago in McKeesport, PA at the age of 98. At the age of 95 she was still counting money for the church after worship on Sundays, attending the symphony and living alone in her home surrounded by a yard abloom with flowers. Then she suffered a stroke that forced her to leave the home she loved and move to a nursing facility. She was unable to walk or dress herself and was often frustrated as she searched for a word or memory that she could not recall. As I was visiting with her one day she gave voice to the question that was nagging at her, “Why am I still alive? I can’t do anything.” So I told her what an aide at the home had told me just moments before, that June helped her get through each day, because when she had tired of caring for ungrateful, surly people and was ready to quit, June would cheer her with love and laughter and gratitude for her care. June hadn’t thought of that making such a difference. She was just being herself, and in so doing, God was at work through her.

God works through all of us, using the gifts with which God has blessed us and the circumstances in which we are living to do good things, sometimes to paint silver linings in the clouds that engulf us. We are to live as those created in the image of God, and thus reflect to the world God’s love and grace and offer to God our thanks and praise. We are to let God work in us and through us, so that in living and in dying, in life and in death, we are the loving people God created us to be – not someone else. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recounts:

*When asked why he did not behave with more dignity Zusya of Hanipol replied, ‘When I get to heaven, they won’t ask me, “Zusya, why weren’t you Moses?” They’ll ask me, “Zusya, why weren’t you Zusya?”’ God does not ask us to be someone else. God asks us to be ourselves.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Can you do that? Can you find in living day to day – in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health – opportunities to be yourself as a reflection of the image of God, living into your vocation as an instrument of God’s love, grace and peace? Paul did, even in prison; he proclaimed the Gospel and inspired others! Perhaps if we do too, then our six-word response to that question about summing up our life might be just this: ***God’s Not Done With Me Yet!*** Amen

1. Ron Ferguson, “Life in Six Words”, *Life & Work*, September 2016, p.17 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life*, Fount Press: London, 2000, p.30 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)