

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 24th Sunday After Pentecost, Nov. 19, 2017

Counting the Days

November 19, 2017

Psalm 90:1-12

About now children everywhere are counting the days until Christmas, 36 days from now, but who is counting?

Adults are more likely to be counting shopping days, 30 days if we exclude Sundays, but today that really doesn't hold because we can shop 24/7 using the Internet and many on-line retailers will promise next day delivery.

Newspaper, radio and TV ads keep reminding us that we are running out of time to make our holiday purchases. Hurry, hurry, hurry. Then comes Black Friday with the huge push to shop and, in many cases, Black Friday starts a day early on Thanksgiving Day.

Auto dealers advertise that they are offering Black Friday pricing for the entire month. The dollar, and spending it dominates our lives and we forget the real reasons for celebrating Thanksgiving and Christmas --- being thankful for what we have and for the birth of our Lord and Savior. Our priorities are totally out of balance.

This month I have been talking about death, the inevitable culmination of our days on this earth. Do we count the days until that time happens?

No we don't. We don't want to think about it but we should.

The average life span for a man today in America is just a bit over 78-1/2 years, which happens to be my age. Half of the men born when I was born are no longer walking this earth. The other half is nearing the end of their lives. Some will be gone soon: others may live to be 100 or a bit more. Women live a bit longer on average than men, but they too will eventually pass on.

We think about the end of our lives but most of us don't dwell on it. We spend our remaining days doing whatever it is that gives us a sense of fulfillment and happiness.

Brian Erickson ⁽¹⁾ asked, *"What if we all woke up every morning and we could see how many days we had left? What if, above the mirror in your bathroom, there was a big digital countdown, letting you know how many days you had to work with?"*

In a way, terminally ill people have such a countdown clock, all be it an imprecise one, when the doctors say that you only have a short time to live, but if you think about it we all have such a clock although we cannot see it. Only God knows what that clock says for each of us.

It is interesting to note that our scripture reading from Psalm 90 says, *“Our days may come to seventy years or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.”*

When that was first said, supposedly by Moses, average life spans were more like 35 to 40 years, not the 70 Or 80 that the psalm suggests. This makes me wonder if Psalm 90, in a way, predicts the situation today. Is about 80 the limit attainable in the average span of human life? I don't know of course and neither does anyone else but the psalm does make us ponder our mortality.

Whatever our life span will be and whatever it will be for future generations, it is brief relatively speaking. God is in control and in due course he will return us to the dust from which we came.

The devotional booklet These Days (December 13, 2014) commented that, *“When completing his life's work of translating the Bible into Latin [the Vulgate Bible], Jerome kept a skull near his desk. He looked at it when he became discouraged. The skull reminded Jerome of his mortality; it motivated him to complete his translation before he died. He was counting his days.*

“We countdown things like the days until Christmas; the seconds until the New Year; the minutes until lunch; or the years to retirement. Do we count our days and remember we are here for a finite time? To be aware of our mortality can awaken us to the prospect of each day and help us approach life differently. A wise heart depends on the grace of Christ to have hope for tomorrow.”

Our Daily Bread (May 8, 2017) said, *“Psalm 90 tells us that though our lives are like grass that withers and fades, we have an eternal home with God. Like Moses, we can ask God to teach us to number our days so we can make wise decisions, and to make our brief lives fruitful by making what we do for him count. Ultimately, the psalm reminds us that our hope is not in a doctor's diagnosis [or the estimate of how much longer we may have to live], but in a God who is ‘from everlasting to everlasting.’”*

Do you remember Henry Clay Work's song, "My Grandfather's Clock"? In the song, when a man was born he was given a clock. His life was reflected in relationship to that clock.

The refrain is:

"Ninety years without slumbering,

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

His life's seconds numbering,

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

But it stopped, short,

Never to go again,

When the old man died."

The ticking of that clock is a reminder that our time on earth is limited as is its relentless chiming of the hour and quarter hour. If you have one of these clocks, as I do, you know what I am referring to.

Back in 2011, Our Daily Bread (September 8, 2011) said, *"One way of numbering our days is to ask ourselves these kinds of questions: How can I become more like Christ? Am I reading the Word regularly? Am I devoting time to prayer? Am I meeting together with other believers? The way we answer these questions is an indicator of the progress we're making in gaining wisdom and becoming more like Christ.*

"No matter the phase of life --- childhood, youth, middle age, or our senior years -- life always affords us opportunities to grow in faith and wisdom. Numbering our days is the wise response to life's inevitable progress.

"How are you progressing on your journey? Don't spend your time --- invest it."

Amen.

(1) Brian Erickson in "A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series",
Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016

Note: Scripture quotes are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011