

The One Thing (Summer Saints 2021: Soren Kierkegaard)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 20, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” (Matthew 13:44-46, NRSV)

Many of the most beloved Hollywood movies come down to being journeys of self-discovery, a journey in which the main character breaks beyond a conventional, unexamined life and comes to a newer, richer knowledge of who they are and why they’re here. One of the more enjoyable examples of this for me was the 1991 film “City Slickers,” for which the unforgettable Jack Palance played “Curly” – a tough old cowboy with a hard exterior which hides a surprisingly sensitive, gentle wisdom. Curly is talking with Mitch (played by Billy Crystal), a “city slicker” who has gone on retreat to this dude ranch out west in search of meaning in the midst of his middle-aged emptiness.

“You know what the secret of life is?” Curly asks. “It’s this”, and he holds up one finger. “One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and nothing else matters.”

Mitch is intrigued but responds as you might imagine he would. “That’s great, Curly, but *what’s* the one thing?”

Curly answers: “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”

I don’t know if Curly ever read any Kierkegaard, but he definitely could have! The great Danish thinker said our problem is that our hearts pull in too many different directions. Purity of heart, he said, is to *will one thing*. It’s to find the *one* thing that really matters, and to pursue it with all your heart, and let everything else fall into its proper place.

This morning, we begin our “Summer Saints” sermon series. We will continue it for a total of eight Sundays, running to August 8. On each of these mornings, we will take up a “saint” ... though not anyone officially canonized, and only three who belong to our own particular trajectory of tradition.

We will see that they are a diverse lot, these summer saints. All have died, and yet all are relevant in a most living way. Upon reading some of their names, you may be intrigued and wonder *what* they have to teach us, but I do believe that each offers something – something very valuable if we’re open and ready to listen.

We start with the Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, and social critic Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). No one figure of the 19th century had a greater impact on 20th century theology than the “Great Dane,” and he can be counted among my own faith “heroes” – those who have

impacted my life of faith and thinking about faith most profoundly. It's all very *personal* for me, but it's my strong belief that he has something to offer *all* of us.

Kierkegaard was born to an affluent family in Copenhagen in 1813. His father Michael was a successful wool merchant; his mother, initially a servant in his father's household. It was a *strange* household – sternly religious, austere, and often melancholic, following the father's ways and temperament, but also one which often hosted prominent intellectuals as guests. It was also one in which young Soren was encouraged to develop his rich imagination, especially through storytelling – through stories his father would start and Soren would be challenged to finish!

He entered the University of Copenhagen with an eye towards a life as a writer and theologian, though he had little interest in historical works, he was dissatisfied with philosophy, and he couldn't see dedicating himself to "speculation." He wanted something *real* ... a faith that mattered ... a faith that would get him out of his head and plunge him into the real world ... a faith that he could give himself to completely. And this longing became a sense of call.

As he wrote in an early Journal entry, in 1835, at the young age of 22 –

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind *what I am to do*, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain knowledge must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes *me* to do: the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the truth for which I can live and die. ... I certainly do not deny ... an *imperative of knowledge* and that through it one can work upon others, *but it must be taken up into my life*, and that is what I now recognize as the most important thing. That is what my soul longs after, as the African desert thirsts for water.

In his reflection following he admits that before he had come to this insight, he had simply thrown himself into life – as a prospective student of law and then of philosophy – throwing himself into a mass of details and knowledge, to the end of mastering all its complexities. Only he found that in all this pursuit of head-knowledge, he was losing himself. He came to see that whatever truth there is that finally matters is a truth that is his *own* ... something, in his own words,

which grows together with the deepest roots of my life, through which I am so to speak, grafted upon the divine, and hold fast to I, even though the whole world fell apart. That is what I lack and that is what I am striving after.

Graduating from university in 1841, he began writing in earnest in 1843, supported by a substantial inheritance from his father who had passed a few years before. Aside from his growing notoriety as a public intellectual, he came to be a familiar face on the streets of Copenhagen. The Danish capital in the 1830s and 40s had crooked streets where carriages rarely went, and Kierkegaard loved to walk them. He once wrote,

I had real Christian satisfaction in the thought that, if there were no other, there was definitely one man in Copenhagen whom every poor person could freely accost and converse with on the street; that, if there were no other, there was one man who, whatever the society he most commonly frequented, did not shun contact with the poor, but greeted every maidservant he was acquainted with, every manservant, every common laborer.

Some very serious philosophical and religious works came from his pen in the 1840's up to the time of his death in 1855 – works which largely form the backbone of his reputation and influence on so much subsequent western thought. But in the hearts and minds of ordinary people, it was his Christian *discourses* that had the most power. They were not sermons, for he never held a pulpit and would never seek to sway a single soul on the basis of any personal authority, education, or title. Rather, they were meant to draw individuals into hearing the challenge of the gospel itself and so experience the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

He encouraged his readers to read these *aloud*, believing that doing so would most powerfully convey the truth that readers have only *themselves* to consider ... that they are being *addressed*, not by some clever or authoritative man named Kierkegaard, but by the word of God itself.

And as he took himself out of the picture, he made all the clearer that though he *desired* that his readers be confronted and transformed by the word, that his principal and final aim was simply to “fear God,” that is, to reverence and honor God. Quoting the scripture II Corinthians 5:11 (“Knowing then what the fear of the Lord means, we endeavor to win men”), he wrote this at the beginning of one of these discourses, one of my own favorites titled “For Self-Examination”:

To begin at once or first of all to wish to win men may even be ungodliness; in every instance it is worldliness and no more Christianity than it is fearing God. No, let your endeavor – let it first and foremost – express that you fear God. This I have tried to do. But Thou, O God, Thou lettest me never forget that even if I did not win a single man, if my *life* expresses that I fear Thee, *All is won!* On the other hand, if I won all men, but my life does *not* express that I fear Thee, *All is lost!*

This absolute commitment to the truth, to fearing God, to a living faith, ironically but inevitably led him in the latter years of his life into conflict with the state Lutheran Church, the Church of Denmark. He saw a church that seemed to equate being a “Christian” with a being a good, respectable citizen, and that – in the name of the good old Lutheran idea of “salvation by grace alone”! – had long ago abandoned even any pretense of truly *following* Christ. He saw an entire nation of the baptized who bore the name “Christian,” but wished to become and remain one at as cheap a price as possible.

He longed for a church that preached the *gospel* and confronted men and women with its radical call to discipleship ... to hear and heed the words and example of Jesus and not just urge

passive assent to a bunch of beliefs *about* Jesus. He longed for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer a century later would call a “costly grace” ... a free grace that costs us everything. In other words, he urged us – and urges us still – to a life of *faith*, what he called “this restless, turbulent thing,” which is true health, and yet is also “stronger and more virulent than the most burning fever.”

For me, it was Kierkegaard, and others, like Bonhoeffer, who were deeply inspired by him, who stirred *this* once-young man to go *deeper*, to seek something more, to long for something that he knew he didn’t have. It’s why I’m so stirred to this day by the conviction that real Christian faith is a *journey of adventure* ... not static ... not still ... absolutely anything but dull! ... and that in the end, demands of us *everything*, all that we are, in the name of knowing a Kingdom ... that One Thing which is like a treasure hidden in a field, for which one would go and sell all they have ... That One Thing which is like a pearl of the greatest value, for which one would give up all else to possess.

May we seek first this Kingdom, and in God’s love and grace, may we find it – to the Glory of God! Amen.