

There's a particular type of story or feature  
that regularly appears in newspapers, magazines,  
and articles that circulate online  
which goes something like this:

A person of great, advanced age looks back on her life  
and considers what's really been important,  
and it's not money or status,  
but relationships and love.

Or someone of wise experience looks back on his younger self  
and realizes how what he values has changed,  
as did a man in my college's most recent alumni magazine,  
who wrote upon his 40th Reunion,  
"[M]uch of what I thought I wanted and couldn't have while I was [in  
college]  
was not what I would come to place much value on in the long term."

The saddest version I've seen of this perennial narrative  
involves an interview with a hospice nurse,  
who reveals that at the end of life,  
people worry little over accomplishments or careers or themselves  
but instead regret having neglected close relationships,  
crave forgiveness for hurtful times,  
and desire reconciliation where there never was any.

Certainly you know this genre,  
stories that shove before our faces  
the "final things" of life:  
the final topics that people tend to consider and contemplate before death,  
yes,  
but also the final, the ultimate, the *most important* things  
that we all agree, deep down,  
life should be about:  
Doing to others as you would have them do to you.  
Turning the other cheek.  
Forgiving as we have been forgiven.

This genre of article reminds us how to live before it feels too late.  
 We tend to go through daily life pursuing other things—  
 careers, success, money,  
 the perfect body, a spotless house, a more prestigious place.  
 We chase these things even when we know this stuff  
 is NOT what really matters,  
 and so we risk only noticing what's really important when it's too late.  
 These articles snap us back to how we would like to live,  
 especially as people of faith:  
 Loving the enemy,  
 forgiving those who've hurt us,  
 showing mercy,  
 giving generously,  
 reconciling.  
 And they give us this reminder NOW,  
 so we don't have to wait until old age or  
 a 40th college reunion  
 or death  
 to live prioritizing these most important,  
 final things.

I don't know if this genre existed in ancient Egypt  
 when Joseph was there,  
 but Joseph certainly finds himself considering these final things  
 in our reading from Genesis this morning.

The quick background:  
 As a child, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers.  
 He moved to Egypt, grew up, and did really well for himself there.  
 He stockpiled a bunch of food before a famine  
 and become a member of the king's court.  
 Now Joseph's brothers have found him in Egypt,  
 and Joseph has this chance to pull one over on his family.  
 To get back at them for everything they had done to him.

But, at this late stage in his life,  
 Joseph has come to recognize what is more important.  
 He has lived with a lifetime of regret and pain,  
 and has realized that life is too short for that.  
 Plus, Joseph asks, “Is my father still alive?”  
 showing he knows his father is even older, about to die.  
 There’s not that much time for them.

So here, with his brothers in front of his throne,  
 God has given Joseph a chance to start again.  
 And Joseph, who knows how many years can be lost to a bad decision,  
 is wise enough to take that fresh start:  
 “Come down to me, do not delay,” he says.  
 “Go get Dad. Settle in my land. All of you, and all that you have.  
 You shall be near me. I will provide for you.”  
 And kissing all his brothers,  
 Joseph does good to those who hated him.  
 Gives to those who came to beg from him.  
 Shows mercy those who harmed him.

Joseph’s brothers walk away fed and forgiven that day,  
 but I think it’s Joseph who walks away from the moment  
*free.*

Joseph is now free  
 from the grip of the grudge against his family.  
 Free from his anger at being unjustly hurt.  
 Free from regretting or pining for what could have been later in his life.  
 Joseph walks away free to begin again with his family.  
 Free to love without expecting anything in return.  
 It’s as if he’s taken giant bolt-cutters to snap the chain of resentment  
 that links him to his brothers,  
 so it can have no more power over him anymore.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, this is certainly a “final thing” Joseph does.  
 With an aging father, needy brothers, a long famine  
 God presented Joseph with a new start,

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<sup>1</sup> A lot of this phrasing and material comes from Pr. Nadia Bolz-Weber’s MAKERS video “Forgive Assholes” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhmRkUtPra8>

and Joseph made the choice worthy of the “final things” genre.

Of course, Joseph is not the first or last person in Holy Scripture to deal with the “final things.”

Our Lord Jesus dealt constantly with the “final things”—  
he *lived* death and resurrection,

loving the enemy,  
praying for his abusers.

And in the Sermon on the Plain,  
which we started hearing last week and read again from this Sunday,  
Jesus confronts us with “final things.”

When Jesus says,

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.  
[And] woe to you who are rich, for you have received your  
consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry  
Jesus brings about the kinds of topsy-turvy values adjustment  
that we tend to make in later, reflective times.

His proclamation of blessings and woes instigates a sort of  
“What I thought I wanted and couldn’t have didn’t end up being  
important”  
way of thinking about the world that’s around us.

And this week, in part two of this Sermon on the Plain,  
Jesus confronts us with “final things” once again,  
making us examine what is ultimate and important  
and valuable and essential to our life as Christians.

Jesus says to us that listen,  
Give to *anyone* who begs of you.  
Do to others as you would have them do to you.  
Love your enemies and do good to your haters.  
And do it expecting *nothing in return*.  
Be merciful only because God is merciful.

It’s not unlike what a woman turning 100  
or an alumnus reflecting on his younger self  
or a hospice nurse recalling her patients’ last thoughts  
would say.

**But Jesus' words are *so much more*  
than advice or words of wisdom.**

Jesus' words, his actions,  
Christ's very life . . . *they are freedom.*  
When Jesus commands us to love our enemies,  
he recognizes that at some point,  
we will all be the victim of some hurt or shame or sin,  
that defined hurt or shame or sin need not define us  
nor dictate our actions in response  
nor determine our future trajectory.  
Because, like for Joseph,  
God encourages us to choose love and forgiveness  
over hate and retaliation.  
And choosing love and forgiveness  
is what frees us.  
Including freeing us from any regret that would bind us in the future  
when the "final things" are *actually* close and final.

Jesus' words of "final things" in the Beatitudes do more than just  
recap life and  
provide a *helpful-summary-of-reflections-*  
*for-those-with-more-time-on-the-clock-than-me.*  
These commands give us the possibility  
to participate in a future beyond ourselves  
and participate in that future TODAY.  
Because as followers of Jesus,  
we are always living in a time of final things:  
experiencing a death to sin and rising to new life in Christ  
every day that we wake up;  
dwelling in the fullness of the Kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven;  
being members of the one community, the Church, that,  
straddling the grave,  
and includes both the living and dead.

Our challenge—and what a challenge it is—  
is to live like it.

To live each day as if we're in a time of "final things"—  
not a "few remaining days,"

but within a timeless life in Christ.

Our call is to live these "final things."

To love our enemies.

To do good to those who hate us.

To not withhold our shirt from someone in need of a coat.

To expect *nothing* in return

because by grace, in freedom, and with Christ,  
we already have everything we need.

We won't do all this perfectly.

We'll need the faith and hope and love and grace of God to do it.

And with this grace, we'll be transformed.

And *that* transformation will be our reward.

Not any worldly success or material gain,

but being made new,

being made free,

having God make us into the people we were meant

and want

to be.

AMEN.