

**THE CHURCH'S "ONE THING"**  
**PENTECOST 22 – PROPER 28 – NOVEMBER 17, 2019**  
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What's real? What's the most real thing we have in our life?

We typically start with the things we can sense with our amazing bodies.

What we can see, hear, taste, touch, smell and feel: measurable stuff, what we usually label reality. Then there's the stuff that is difficult to measure, but are essential to life; at least, I don't want to live without them: beauty, love, friendship, meaning, and a sense of purpose – what we might label as ideals.

At its most basic, religion – all religion – indeed, all belief systems – are about the connection between these two aspects of life: reality and ideals.

These two things intersect in our readings today.

Isaiah lays out the ideal of God in glorious detail: life, joy, abundance, peace.

In the Canticle we sang, called the First Song of Isaiah, we proclaim our trust in God's ideal as the very definition of salvation.

Paul, who has just been chased from another Greek city for proclaiming Christ, boldly stands up to tell the pagan Greeks in Athens – in full view of the massive Temple to Athena that dominates the skyline – that they, too, are creations of the living God.

Yes, this is the God worshipped by the Jews, but Greeks, too, are included. No one is left out!

All are invited to be part of the community that shares the living God's ideal.

This is all pretty great, isn't it? Then Jesus gets, well, real.

The huge Temple in Jerusalem, as big as 10 football fields and 10 stories tall,<sup>1</sup> was a marvel of engineering and construction, made of massive stone blocks and full of intricate symbols.

The Temple took 46 years to build, but Jesus said it would soon be a pile of rubble.

Why? The Jews had a history of rallying behind a steady stream of heroes and saviors claiming to act in God's name and preaching violent resistance to the mighty Roman Empire.

In less than 40 years, the Empire would tire of Jewish rebelliousness, crush them, and level their mighty Temple until only a part of a foundation wall was left.

Then Jesus gets even more real (again, today's headlines in a 2,000-year-old book).

He tells those around him that NOTHING humans make is permanent.

For one thing, the earth itself is still in a state of becoming:

it's a burgeoning, changing planet of shifting land masses that rumble and roll, and it gazes out into a wild universe that isn't finished being created.

Not only that, but people who share this island home keep doing things to each other:

building stuff, destroying other folks' stuff, fighting each other, doing their level best to force everyone else to do what they want. It's kind of a mess.

Jesus' bottom line? Don't worry about it. God has this.

All our fussing and fighting for dominance is utterly futile – because we're not in charge!

Wide-scale food shortages and epidemics are not what God wants for us; disaster is not God's plan for us.

What God does want for us is for us to be saved by GOD's plan;

in fact, if God is God, then God's plan is our destiny. What's that plan?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/look-inside-jeruselems-sacred-temple-318931>

Back to Isaiah, back to Canticle 9, back to God's ideal: life, joy, abundance and peace.

To make our way through the tough times of reality, we don't need a new hero, a new savior, a new messiah; the God we have already is more than sufficient.

What we need is to focus better on THAT God's plans.

Anyone watching movies in the early 90s likely saw *City Slickers*, with its famous scene featuring a cowboy named Curly (Jack Palance) and a city slicker name Mitch Robbins (Billy Crystal). Curly gives Mitch some life advice. <sup>2</sup>



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*Dialogue from the clip:*

Curly: How old are you? 38?

Mitch: 39.

Curly: Yeah, you all come up here about the same age, same problems. You spend about 50 weeks a year gettin' knots in your rope, and then you think 2 weeks up here'll untie 'em for you. None of you get it.

Do you know what the secret of life is?

Mitch: No. What?

Curly: This. [*Holding up his index finger.*]

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: [*Still holding up index finger.*] One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and everything else don't mean [dip].

Mitch: That's great, but, what's the one thing? [*Holding up his own index finger.*]

Curly: [*Pointing at Mitch.*] That's what you gotta figure out.

Mitch: [*Looks quizzically at his index finger.*]

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So, what's the secret of life for us? What's the one thing?

As Curly said, every person has to figure that out for themselves.

Congregations have to do it, too.

The lessons from Scripture tell us: we don't need new saviors, we need to stick to that one thing, and everything else don't mean dip.

What's the one thing? To answer that, here's a story, a parable, that I've told in every parish I've ever served, including here . . .

but the last time was 6 years ago. Some of you weren't here then.

It's time to tell it again.

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On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, <sup>3</sup> there was once a crude little life-saving station.

The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for themselves,

they went out day and night during storms, tirelessly searching for the shipwrecked and lost.

Members gave their time and money and effort to support this wonderful work.

New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little life-saving station was made bigger, sturdier and warmer,

so that the first refuge of those saved from the sea was a true haven.

They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building.

<sup>2</sup> *City Slickers*, 1991, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved.

<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Canon Theodore Wedel, <https://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/272/parable-of-the-lifesaving-station>

Soon the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and used it as a sort of club.

Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work.

The life-saving motif still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was even a stylized, lovely life-boat that hung in the room where the club's initiations were held.

About this time a large ship wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick. The beautiful new club was in chaos.

The property committee immediately built a shower house OUTSIDE the club where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside and making a big mess.

At the next meeting, there was a split among the club membership.

Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities.

It was dirty work and interfered with the club's social life.

No one much liked the desperate strangers that came from the wrecks, anyway.

Some members insisted upon life-saving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station.

They were voted down and told that if they wanted to save strangers' lives they could go on down the coast and begin their own life-saving station. So they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes:

it evolved into a club, people argued, left, founded another life-saving station.

History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore.

Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but now most of the people drown.

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What do you think of this story?

The original version of this parable was written by an Episcopal priest, The Rev. Canon Theodore O. Wedel, in 1953, to challenge the notion that the role of the church in society was to give its members the religious goods and services they demanded and paid for.

But a church "one thing" is NOT to deliver religious goods and services to customers; and it's not a place where professionals do the work for the members.

The professionals are here to support, encourage and equip the members for the one thing we are all supposed to stick to:

to live into God's ideal: life, joy, abundance and peace for the whole planet.

We are here to do this one thing by doing what Jesus did: serving and giving, seeking the welfare, not of ourselves, but of others.

Our vision and mission as a parish is to be a life-saving station, not a clubhouse.

Remember our parish Vision and Mission statements:

We aspire to live in a world where ALL creation thrives in God's love.

We seek to become who God created us to be by worshipping joyfully, respecting all, sharing generously, and nurturing every spirit.

In my experience, "others," those strangers who are NOT part of a church today are not so much ignorant of the Church as they are skeptical of it.

They dismiss, out of hand, religious threats and manipulation.

They are cynical about any group that preaches God's love but is hateful towards those of whom it disapproves.

However, these same people are just as hungry for good news as we are, they have the same yearning we do for God's ideal, even if they wouldn't use those words.

Jesus told us to hold fast to God to gain our lives; which means we are to utterly trust God's ideal,  
 opening our hands and hearts to strangers,  
 working alongside God in the healing of a broken and beautiful world.

Now, this parish excels at serving those who suffer the storms of life;  
 one look at our Mission & Ministry directory shows that.

If you aren't aware of how we serve, please, take a directory from the pew!  
 But, what if people didn't have to be shipwrecked before we include them?

IF we believe that this parish is committed to sticking to that one thing,  
 of living into God's ideal of life, joy, abundance and peace for all creation,  
 THEN we should be inviting all kinds of people to be involved in it,  
 to be part of our life-saving station in the midst the reality of awful storms.

Today, members of our Invite + Welcome + Connect Team are going to hand out business cards to you,  
 because our church business is proclaiming salvation, God's ideal for Creation,  
 in the midst of our very tough reality.

These cards aren't for you to keep!

Use these to invite people to come with you to Good Shepherd to join us in the one thing:  
 living into God's ideal of life, joy, abundance and peace for all Creation.

We do this not because we'll be in trouble if we don't;

remember, we don't worry have to worry about anything. God has this.

We do it because God has invited us to join God in making the plan real;

and if God is God, we should stick with this one thing, because nothing else means dip.

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#### COLLECT OF THE DAY

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without you nothing is strong, nothing is holy. Embrace us with your mercy, that with you as our ruler and guide, we may live through what is temporary without losing what is eternal; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

#### ISAIAH 65:17-25

Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth: past events won't be remembered; they won't come to mind. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I'm creating, because I'm creating Jerusalem as a joy and her people as a source of gladness.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad about my people. No one will ever hear the sound of weeping or crying in it again. No more will babies live only a few days, or the old fail to live out their days. The one who dies at a hundred will be like a young person, and the one falling short of a hundred will seem cursed. They will build houses and live in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They won't build for others to live in, nor plant for others to eat. Like the days of a tree will be the days of my people; my chosen will make full use of their handiwork. They won't labor in vain, nor bear children to a world of horrors, because they will be people blessed by the Lord, they along with their descendants. Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear. Wolf and lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but the snake—its food will be dust. They won't hurt or destroy at any place on my holy mountain, says the Lord.

#### CANTICLE 9

Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid.

**For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior.**

Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation.

**And on that day you shall say, give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;**

Make his deeds known among the peoples; see that they remember that his Name is exalted.

**Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things, and this is known in all the world.**

Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.

**ACTS 17:22,24-28**

Paul stood up in the middle of the council on Mars Hill and said, "People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn't live in temples made with human hands. Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn't far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, 'We are his offspring.'"

**LUKE 21:5-19**

Some people were talking about the temple, how it was decorated with beautiful stones and ornaments dedicated to God. Jesus said, "As for the things you are admiring, the time is coming when not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished." They asked him, "Teacher, when will these things happen? What sign will show that these things are about to happen?" Jesus said, "Watch out that you aren't deceived. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I'm the one!' and 'It's time!' Don't follow them. When you hear of wars and rebellions, don't be alarmed. These things must happen first, but the end won't happen immediately."

Then Jesus said to them, "Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other. There will be great earthquakes and wide-scale food shortages and epidemics. There will also be terrifying sights and great signs in the sky. But before all this occurs, they will take you into custody and harass you because of your faith. They will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will provide you with an opportunity to testify. Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance. I'll give you words and wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to counter or contradict. You will be betrayed by your parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, and friends. They will execute some of you. Everyone will hate you because of my name. Still, not a hair on your heads will be lost. By holding fast, you will gain your lives."

**SERMON HYMN:** *O God of Every Nation*

**BLESSING:**

Deep peace of the running wave to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the love of God to you.

The blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be with you, Now and forever.