I recently spoke with someone who did not know the background of my previous career as a physician, and specifically as a medical examiner. The person was interested in how I came to change careers in my forties. The short answer is God, God kept calling and eventually I needed to answer.

The longer answer to why I answered the call from God usually involves relaying a conversation which took place years ago between me and a detective. The detective, when she spoke about the kids on the streets, which in DC are primarily young African American males, said that “the kids on the street, they are more afraid to live than to die.” That statement is rather halting. It tends to draw us up short to some hard circumstances to which we in suburbia of northern Virginia don’t really relate. Circumstances where situations are stacked against you, that don’t allow success in a life that doesn’t bring contentment or happiness, but instead pain and misery with early deaths in the family either by violence or drug abuse, but also no forseeable way out. Generally we do not have lives that seem so predetermined and so difficult that dying might be an easy out for us, and something less to be feared than such a life.

Truly there are moments too for those who contemplate or go on to commit suicide where the pain of the depression, the demon with which they struggle seems insurmountable and the pain of death seems a better answer. In some ways these are similar circumstances. Life is too hard, death seems easier.

Paul for a moment speaks of wishing to be dead in order to be with Christ. He seems to be musing outloud and then takes it back, as much as he wants in death to be with his Savior. Always we hear that when someone dies the phrase "he or she is in a better place" as a point of comfort for the living. This serves not only as a strong profession of faith of what we believe the next phase of life with Christ is, but it also serves as a consolation. In that sense it is good, we are consoled in our grief, thinking the person is somewhere without pain and suffering. But in some ways that message actually undermines one of Paul’s central messages… that living today in Christ is what matters most and then leads to the next life. It is a “both/ and.” One can only think about life after death if you examine and live fully your life before death. And we can’t truly live if you are living for something that comes only later. That kind of life is not a life which is flourishing. Focusing entirely on the the assuredness of things unseen sometimes actually leaves us paralyzed when it comes to living in what is seen.

And so the question is not much different, are we afraid to live the life that Christ has in mind for us? or are we afraid of what the pearly gates have in store? do we live a life less than we could, still afraid we might not make it to heaven, trusting in God to have mercy, but not doing the actions Christ requires of us? Still it leads me to question: are we more afraid to live the kind of life that Christ had in mind for us, or are we more afraid to die? We do often speak wistfully of heaven and joining Christ, but we don’t know what that entails and so we often cling to a life which is less than what it could be and less than what God wants of us; we live each time kind of in a go along to get along word, but not living a life in Christ and then at the end, we cling not wanting to go silently into the night of the great unknown.

So what does it mean to live this life you have fully, to live in Christ? It is to love, to love unabashedly, fully, everyone, neighbor and stranger alike, like the Samaritan, everyone. Loving is like fire; it’s no wonder the Spirit is likened to fire. You love and like a fire it grows, you feel love back, the very act of loving fills, it gives worth, allows forgiveness and recognition of shared humanity. God is love and so there is nothing, nothing else that matters. Love/ God is what can pull us back from a fear of living and into the joy of living.

And so we are to live fully, completely, giving our lives over to God, and in today’s parable we learn a bit of Good news: that it doesn’t matter when we start. God gives freely to us as we give freely to working in the garden for God, whenever it is that you start.

So let’s start today.