

Haslett Community Church- United Church of Christ
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost & Outdoor Worship- June 15, 2008

Scripture lessons: Psalm 90:1-6, 10-12 & I Corinthians 15:42-44 & 53-58

FACING DEATH

Death is never an easy subject to think or talk about. Woody Allen's old joke gets close to a common feeling we have about it- "It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens." We'd rather not die and before we do we'd just as soon forget that one day we will.

I certainly wasn't planning on thinking or talking about death for this service. For our once-a-year outdoor worship on a Sunday when many of us also join with our wider culture in celebrating Father's Day, I was going to reflect instead on the topic of Christian faith and our families, especially on our calling to pass on our faith to our children.

But as I mentioned last week in our Prayers of the People time, it seems that when death strikes our congregational family, it does so in waves. From this past September to the beginning of January, eight of us died. Recently in the space of ten days, so did three more of us, including our oldest member and charter member, Bohn Musgrave. When death repeatedly strikes so close to home in such a short period of time I can't help but think about it.

As we get older and our bodies become less and less able, it becomes harder not to think about it, too. The day of our own death starts to feel closer and we're drawn into wondering about how it might come and when and where. We start to pay more attention to obituaries in the newspaper and find more and more people of our own age in them. At funerals and memorial services for our peers we feel grief over two deaths: the death of our friend or loved one and the dying off of the generation we've shared with them.

The great 20th century Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner once wrote of how the death of so many of his peers affected him. He said it led him to look at his life "as a long highway filled by a column of marchers. Every moment someone breaks out of line and goes off silently, without a word or wave of farewell . . . The number of marchers gets steadily smaller, for the new ones coming up to fill the ranks are not really marching in my column at all."

It's not only the oldest of us who die, of course. Bohn was 103 on his last day, but Ken Berridge and Craig McAuley were only 64 on theirs. In Delta Township, Shelly Mikko was only 43 when last Sunday's storm blew a travel trailer onto her. Aaron Eilerts, Josh Fennen, Sam Thomsen, and Ben Petrzilka, four Boy Scouts at the Little Sioux Camp near Blencoe, Iowa were only 13 or 14 when a tornado wiped them out this past week. Tim Russert was only four years older than me when a heart attack killed him two days ago.

We can try to forget or ignore the fact that death comes to us all and we don't know when. We can try to cover it over or sanitize it so that it seems like no big deal. But it is a big deal and it's phony to pretend that it's not. The Bible knows that.

Our first Scripture for today from Psalm 90 speaks openly and directly about it. It says, "For all our days pass away under your wrath, (O Lord); our years come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away" (verses 9 & 10).

These days more people than ever live past seventy or eighty, but death still comes to them, to younger ones, and to all of us. We can try to conceal or deny it, but it doesn't fly away. Anyone who says, even facetiously, "I'm not long for this world," tells the truth.

Psalm 90 lives face-to-face with that truth. In light both of death's inevitability and unpredictability the psalmist prays, "So teach us (Lord) to count our days that we may gain a wise heart" (verse 12). Wisdom comes in remembering that we will die.

“Memento mori,” the medieval church used to say- “Remember death.” Remembering that it’s always at our door helps keep our life in truer perspective. Things that otherwise can seem so hugely important properly recede into far less significance when we remember that we’re dying- things, for example, like looks and style, power and status, money and possessions.

Recall a time when you or someone you truly love has had a serious brush with death- an encounter so close and undeniable that you’ve been forced to believe right now that it will indeed come. Remember how unimportant so many things suddenly became- things that have to do with keeping up appearances or maintaining stuff that doesn’t last. Who on their deathbed says, “I wish I’d spent more time primping in front of the mirror, or pushing myself ahead of others, or making money, or accumulating and fussing over my things?”

Remembering death, we can focus better on the real point of our lives. As St. John of the Cross said, “In the evening of our lives, we will be judged on our love.” The number one regret people have on their deathbeds isn’t that they haven’t been better looking or more famous or wealthier, but that they haven’t told their children or their parents how much they’ve loved them. The number one pang they feel in their hearts is their longing to forgive and reconcile with those from whom they’ve been estranged.

Remembering that death’s at our door helps us better remember our genuine purpose. We’re in this life to become like Jesus Christ- to grow in wisdom like he did, to follow in his way learning to welcome children, to make our hearts known to each other in laughter and in tears, to reach out in compassion and justice to the weak and wounded, the stranger and outcast, to take up our cross for the healing of creation, to give of ourselves deeply in care and understanding for all God’s children.

What do we think will be most important to us on our dying day? Let that be most important now. Let it be of first importance because each of us, in fact, is on our deathbed.

Samuel Johnson once noted that the thought of death around the next corner “wonderfully clarifies the mind”. Let our minds be crystal clear that death is near to all of us. With the clarity of its dark light comes true wisdom, the wisdom to center now on what really matters. “Teach us, Lord, to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.”

Yet why should we bother with all that? Why struggle to follow in Jesus’ way, loving anyone other than myself or caring about anything at all if death is so close, so strong, and so universal? If it’s *the* End with a capital “E”, then what’s the point? Why not do whatever I feel like doing whenever I want and for as long as I can get away with it? Why not do that, if ultimately it all comes to nothing?

That’s a perfectly good question, and there’s no good answer to it that I can see if death is the End. But it’s not.

Deepest down in the clearest, truest place at the finest, stillest point of our souls, we know that it’s not. Life is too great. It’s too wonderful and too valuable for death to have the last word on it. Instead, we know that life comes to us from the hand of the Eternal One who intends and is able to face, fight, and conquer death. *God* wants and is able to wipe death away so that all of life will be redeemed and made new- made new in the glory of God’s new creation. John Donne’s famous words are right to the point: “Death be not proud . . . Death thou shalt die.”

That’s what we long for and trust to be true. This longing and trust lie at the core of our hearts and they don’t steer us wrong. They are blessed promptings of the Holy Spirit. They put us in touch with the deepest, most sacred truth that we most want and need to know. It’s the truth that’s confirmed, validated, ratified, and decisively revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What God has begun in the risen Jesus, God will continue and complete in us and for the whole creation.

What does that mean? To say the least, it’s hard to say. Undeniably, there’s a kind of holy reticence about it in the Bible and rightly so. In I Corinthians, chapter 2, St. Paul says, “No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (verse 9). In I Corinthians, chapter 13, Paul says, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but

then we shall see face to face” (verse 12). When we were in our mother’s womb, we couldn’t conceive of this life and in the womb of this life we can’t conceive of what God has in store for us in the next. But as Easter people, we get a glimpse.

In the resounding words of resurrection faith we heard earlier from I Corinthians, chapter 15, St. Paul says, “. . . we will all be changed . . . and the dead will be raised imperishable . . . For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality . . . then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’” (verse 54-55)

This is not mere sentiment. Resurrection faith doesn’t sweetly see us and this world to be like trees and flowers that cyclically come to life again in the spring after passing through death in the winter. Death from this life isn’t just a “passing over” into a springtime rebirth that leads once more to death. Death in this life really is the end of us- just as it really was the end of Jesus.

But in Easter faith we hold that God’s power will at last, once and for all, conquer even that power of death that really does bring us to an end. The power of God raised to NEW LIFE the Jesus who really had been crucified, dead, and buried. This Jesus is the one in whom we, as Christians, see the meaning and destiny not only of every human life, but of the whole creation.

In another of his revelatory images, Paul says that the risen Christ is the “first fruits” (15:23). He’s not the whole harvest, but he is the promise of the harvest to come. We wouldn’t celebrate for long a single sheaf of grain that didn’t give us hope for more grain. In the same way, we wouldn’t celebrate Jesus’ resurrection for long if it didn’t give us hope for all. In Jesus’ resurrection to new and deathless life we anticipate our own resurrection and that of the whole creation.

What more can be said of the life resurrected? Paul makes clear that for us it won’t be life in this body resuscitated. In this body, in this life, we die. We come from dust and to dust we return. But the new life we hope for in God’s power is new life in a new body, the resurrection body, so to speak.

In I Corinthians 15, Paul calls it a “spiritual body” (verse 44). He’s trying to talk about what can’t be said plainly, about what is mystery in the most profound sense. But the point of his teaching about the spiritual *body* is that WE shall be raised- that which is most truly us with all of our particular history and identity. In the life of the world to come, there will be both radical continuity *and* discontinuity with who we have been here. Remember the risen Christ carried the scars of his wounds.

Maybe the best way to think of it is to say that in the life resurrected we’ll possess whatever in the new heaven and earth corresponds to our bodies in this world. Through life in that body in God’s new creation we will at last know fully and forever the vibrant, joyful, and loving harmony of all with all which God has intended from the start.

It’s the greatest thrill to try to even imagine how great this will be. In all its forms, death will die. Everything gone wrong will at last be made right. Everything sick will be healed. Every false separation will be overcome. Everything out of whack will be put back into place. Every warp will be made smooth. Every broken thing will be made whole.

New, blissful, and eternal life with God and each other will be for Bohn Musgrave, Ken Berridge, Craig McAuley, Shelly Mikko, Aaron Eilerts, Josh Fennen, Sam Thomsen, Ben Petrzilka, and Tim Russert. New, blissful, and eternal life with God and each other will be for every father or mother who has ever died, for every baby who’s ever been drowned in a tsunami, flood, cyclone, or hurricane, for every child who’s ever been crushed in an earthquake, for every infant who’s ever been driven to death by neglect or abuse, for every slave who’s ever been held in chains, for every innocent who’s ever been lost in war, for every one of God’s beloved who’s ever been or will be, for you, for me, for anyone who wants it.

Our expectation of this world to come is rooted simply and purely in our faith in God’s almighty love. How and when God will bring it about and how and when God will defeat death once and for all within it are things far beyond our knowing. But in closing, I’d like to tell an old

story from theologian John Baillie that I also shared at brother Bill Henner's memorial service. I think it helps us see through to the heart of our Easter faith, shrouded as it is in mystery.

A doctor came to the house of a man who was dying. The man asked if the doctor had any conviction about what awaited him beyond death's door. The doctor fumbled for an answer, but then heard scratching at the door. With the scratching came his answer.

"Hear that noise?" the doctor said. "That's my dog. I left him downstairs, but he hears my voice and has come up. He's scratching at a door that he's never been inside of, but he knows that I'm in here and that's enough. Neither do we know what lies beyond death's door, but we know our Master is there- and that's enough."

God is with us on this side of death's door. God will be with us beyond death's door, holding in store for us God's new world. Therefore, we pray with the psalmist, "Teach us, Lord, to count our days that we may gain wise hearts." We sing with St. Paul, "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." We say with John Donne, "Death be not proud . . . Death, thou shalt die." Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

Great God of all, we praise You that through Your mighty love You have raised Jesus Christ from the dead. In his resurrection, You have shown us that nothing, not even death, can separate us from You. Free us in resurrection faith to live joyfully, confidently, and wisely in the way of Jesus Christ, knowing that in him is life eternal.

In Christ's resurrection, You have triumphed over violence and injustice. Free us to risk ourselves in the struggle for justice and peace that we may join with You in restoring creation to Your loving purpose.

In Christ's resurrection, You have opened the gates to life everlasting. Free us from every fear of death, that we may serve You with courage that never dies.

In Christ's resurrection, You have brought new life out of the worst loss. Free us from every temptation to despair that we may bring hope to all, especially to those most burdened by this world's brokenness.

Through the gifts of Your Holy Spirit, make us truly Your people, a community filled with Your freedom, love, and hope. Work Your new creation in us now so that we will have sweet foretastes of the new heaven and earth.

You are the God of all creation, the final conqueror of death, and the Lord of the world to come. We praise You forever in the name of our Risen Savior and we pray for Your coming in the way that he has taught us, saying together, "Our Father, . . ." Amen.