

“Dying Towards Life”
(Heb 2:5-9,14-18)

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I’d like to preach a sermon about dying. But my hope is that it will ultimately be a joyful sermon, because it is about dying in a good way. I once heard a famous theologian say that the Gospel story is all about “learning how to die well” and I’d like to unpack that a bit, because it sounds negative and frightening at first. But I think it is actually the most optimistic and the most realistic approach to life that a person can have.

A Realistic Faith

First of all, to learn how to die well is realistic because death, as both a physical reality and as the passing away of things we value, is unavoidable. There is no escaping that fact. That’s just the way it is in this material world. And that is how it has always been.

At the deepest spiritual level, our faith teaches us that there is an eternity of which our souls are a part, where we live forever with the God who loves us. We go to a place we call heaven. But as far as this earthly existence goes, to cling to a particular material form and insist on its permanence, is to deny reality.

The Bible itself stands adamantly against our giving the status of absolute permanence to any material thing. That status belongs to God alone. And to attribute it to anything other than the life of God is what the Bible calls “idolatry.” “Thou shalt not make false idols” is the Second of the ten Commandments.

And so, for example, it is not surprising that, when Jesus’s disciples were admiring the awesome magnificence and seeming permanence of the temple in Jerusalem, his response was that one day “not one stone will be left upon another” and that it would all be in ruins. His concern was that their allegiance be to God and not to any material thing.

And so, I think that the task of “learning how to die well” is realistic. Because that task requires us to accept that impermanence and death are unavoidable.

An Optimistic Faith

Once we have accepted this, a great question to ask is, “What is the most grace filled way to die?” And the most optimistic answer I can think of is the answer Jesus provides for us in the Gospels. Jesus shows us a way of living that actually frees us from the need to live lives

imprisoned by the fear of death, by offering us a life by which, in giving our lives up to God, we die into a greater life.

This is the message of the death and resurrection. In the Gospel story Jesus's life moves constantly in the direction of his own death, or so it appears to those fixated on the material world. But, to those who have faith, his journey will pass through death to everlasting life with God.

And through the course of his life, Jesus is constantly engaged in faithfully doing the things that express God's love in the here and now, in this world. They are the same things God is asking us to do in this morning's Old Testament reading, to "cease doing evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow".

Jesus sets the example for us; so that when we give our own lives into the service of expressing God's love, in essence, living out of God's love, we participate, not only in his death, but in his resurrection to eternal life. It is a life dedicated to bringing all the world into the fullness of life.

And so for Jesus and for those who follow in his footsteps, dying well is not finally about dying at all. It is all about living fully.

Dying Well as a Church

One reason I want to speak of dying well, is because of the anxiety that people in churches today feel about the future, not only for themselves but for their individual congregations. Because the fear of death also applies to the way we feel about our institutions and we are living in a time of concern that the church as we have known it is dying.

When I look at our church building, I know that it is much more than a pile of bricks and wood. It a repository of sacred memories, of events and people, past and present who have touched and shaped our lives. And regardless of the fact that one church may look very much like the next, each has housed the Body of Christ in a way that is as unique as a set of fingerprints.

Nobody had a heart quite like Aunt Bertha, who sat two rows from the front on the left and nobody could break the ice at a tense meeting in the social hall like Grandpa Fred. And look at the way the floor is constructed. It was my father or grandfather who did that.

When we talk about church buildings, it is almost as though we are talking about living persons, to whom we connect so many of the things we treasure in their hearts. We feel an affection for them that is not

unlike the affection we invest in each other. And so we wonder, “If the church building goes, what will happen to all the memories and values that we have anchored in it? Will they evaporate and cease to exist?”

At the Bedside

Today, in many churches, it is as though the building went to the doctor and received a worrisome prognosis. And we the parishioners are like family standing around the bed in which the church building is comfortably resting. The oxygen levels are going through some ups and downs and everyone is a bit shocked and uncertain about how to deal with the prognosis. The doctor says 10 or maybe 15 years or whatever the prognosis is.

There are things that can be done to alleviate the situation, perhaps prolong the life of the patient. But if the patient’s life is prolonged, “At what cost to the quality of it’s life?” Should the church building be preserved at all costs or at what point should the parishioners be willing to let it go and think about a future in which members can go on with life in some new setting? Or will the members disperse? What will be lost and what will be gained by the choices made? How will cherished memories and traditions be retained, if the building which was designed to create and hold those memories together is no more?

There is the well-known phrase “the congregation is the people and not the building,” which is true. But it does not really address the value the building holds as an anchoring symbol for a people’s way of life. It sounds almost as callous as saying that a person lying in a bed is just a body and not a being full of precious experiences.

And yet it is true. The building is not a person. It is only a building. It is a tool designed to nurture a community of followers of Jesus and to guide them in his ways. It is a tool designed in and for a particular set of circumstances. And if a tool becomes too unwieldy to accomplish the task for which it was designed, it is time to cast about for a more effective tool.

William Lazareth’s Visit

As far back as the early 90’s, when I was in Seminary, I remember a famous theologian who came to talk to us student about this very thing. Even in those days, churches were losing membership, seminaries were downsizing, and the Church, while growing and thriving in many parts of the third world, was shrinking in this country.

From the pulpit, William Lazareth thundered (he was a feisty kind of guy) that the church must continue to be the church and if necessary

die, if that is what is required in order to continue to be the church. The critical thing was not that the church be perpetuated in its current form, but that we continue to be faithful witnesses to the love of Christ in our hearts. And if it comes down to a choice between continuing to live in the Spirit of Christ and perpetuating the church in its current form, then being faithful to the Spirit of Christ has to win out. Remember, that Jesus was only 32 when he gave up his life, so longevity was clearly not his top priority.

That day in the Seminary chapel and William Lazareth's breathtaking sermon, has come back to me in recent days. Finances and participation in fund raising are like oxygen levels for the future of our church buildings, as they now exist. And we watch anxiously, as inflation and competition from other non-profits cause our church's "O levels" to fluctuate in alarming ways.

As loved ones stand around the bedside of a beloved church building, it is hard to know what each is thinking. One might be ready to say goodbye. Another might not be. A third might be thinking that any talk of hospice is way too premature. The vital signs are still fairly strong. The more practical loved ones will be wondering how the duty of caring for the church can be spread out, so that caring for it doesn't fall more on some than on others. But all have an investment in, and a

commitment to, the common life that has been built up over so many years and is being held together under its gracious awnings.

Needless to say, when people are gathered around the bedside of an ailing patient, the conversation can grow heated as it often does, when people who are making decisions about someone they care deeply about.

But there is also a bright side to all of this. Aside from the fact that good solutions may be found, inflation could drop, new ideas could lead to new members and so on. There is also this one important fact that we can keep uppermost. That for those who are alive in Christ, death in its various forms is not the fearsome end that we normally suppose it to be. It is the beginning of a greater life to which God will raise us up.

God will not let anything that is precious simply evaporate and cease to be; but will finally unite us with all that is precious in the world to come. And so there is no need for us to fear. We have only to serve God faithfully, by living in the Spirit of Jesus. And dwelling in his love, we can rejoice, because no matter what happens on this earthly plane, death has no power to destroy us and we have nothing to fear.