

“Death Is Hard”

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John 12:24-27 (NRSVUE)

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

Woody Allen once said, “I am not afraid of dying. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

For people who claim to believe in Resurrection, we are surprisingly uncomfortable with the topic of death. Most of us have been to a funeral home to pay respects after someone has died. Attitudes have shifted significantly in my lifetime about visitation or calling hours – if the casket should be open or even there at all. If it is an open casket, the deceased is made to look as natural as possible, dressed thoughtfully, made up, and laid out peacefully as though they might just be taking a nap. As a person who has officiated scores of funerals and attended countless more, I note how people act at times of mourning. Some people go to the casket for a moment of reflection or prayer. Others are less comfortable but can push through their discomfort enough to at least pass by the casket out of respect before greeting the family. But some take a hard left turn to avoid seeing the dead person altogether. Overall, people don’t attend calling hours the way they used to. Yet the number of people who show up at the funeral home far surpasses the number of people who visited that person as they were nearing the end of their life.

We don’t like to talk about death. We don’t even like to think about it. We go to great lengths to avoid “the D word.” We say a person has “passed away,” as if one day they just mysteriously floated off somewhere. Or we shorten it to say they “passed,” which sounds more like they just completed a test. When someone close to us dies, we sometimes say that we lost them, as though they have just been misplaced, but they’ll turn up eventually. We might say they “went to be with the Lord,” which seems to suggest they are just visiting heaven for a while; later they’ll come back and tell us all about it. Where I grew up, people were fond of saying the deceased “went home to glory,” which has a nice ring to it, I suppose. I have an unwritten rule for the staff at Church of the Saviour about this. When someone dies, we say that they *died*. We don’t use euphemisms for death. Doing so might feel gentler, but it doesn’t help us to deal with reality. I believe we should call a thing what it is.

Death makes us uncomfortable. Maybe one of the reasons we don’t like to talk or think about people dying is that it leads us to contemplate our own death. For some people, thinking about dying is terrifying. Or perhaps it isn’t our *own* death that scares us as much as the thought of our loved ones dying. I’ve journeyed through grief with enough of you over the years to appreciate why. I, too, have had friends and loved ones die, and I know that I will experience many more moments of grief in my life if I live long enough to see them.

The reality is that every one of us will die someday. That's part of the contract that comes with life. Whether we're comfortable with the idea or not, sooner or later death comes to all of us. That doesn't mean we should become obsessed with death or talk about it all the time – that's as sure a way as I know to reduce your number of friends. But I think that many of our efforts to avoid the subject of death are misguided.

As a pastor, some of the deepest and most meaningful conversations I have had are with a person who knows they are dying or with family members when death is imminent. When you know your time is short, there is no point in pretending things are different or waiting for the right moment to talk about what matters most. Things that need to be said or done must be purposeful. Hopes are named. Fears are faced. Faith becomes less abstract and more urgent. I have sat at tables with families that spoke openly and earnestly about what was about to happen and how they would show up for each other, and I have been with families that refused to discuss death because the whole idea was too painful. I can assure you that every time, the choice was less costly for those who faced death with honesty and courage.

A time in ministry I will never forget came in 2017. Marc Ziegler had been experiencing abdominal pain that had grown much more acute, necessitating hospitalization. I stopped at the hospital to see how he was doing and to pray with him. As it happened, I arrived just as the doctor was leaving the room. I entered to discover that Marc and Susan had just been given the diagnosis of acute leukemia and a prognosis that Marc had only weeks or a few months to live. It was devastating news. I pulled up a chair and said something like, "I guess we have some things to talk about." Was he afraid? *Yes, a little. Not of dying, but of leaving Susan, and of the uncertainty of what lay ahead.* We talked about how he would spend the time he had left, of the people and the places that were most important to him. Susan had the sudden insight, "We've traveled everywhere together, Marc. But I can't go with you on *this* journey. Not yet." We cried together and we laughed a little and we prayed – not a prayer of desperation, a prayer of gratitude and trust. I consider it one of the greatest gifts in my ministry to have been with them that day and through the next several months to the day Marc died. Through their profound faith and deep love, they taught me much about dying with grace and courage and how to be present with and for each other. Marc and Susan made me a better pastor. I will always be grateful for the gift of being part of their lives during that time.

Years earlier, I had a very different experience, before I was a pastor. I visited someone in the hospital from the church where I worked. She was nearly 90 and had been living with cancer for over a decade. Her two adult sons were with her; at least one of them stayed around the clock. When I arrived, a former pastor was with them. I offered to come back later, but she wanted me to stay. We talked a bit about how she was feeling, how the treatment was going, what was happening at home. Suddenly, she began to weep. Her son asked her what was wrong. "I don't want to die," she said. It was as if time stopped. Superficial conversation was swept away, a chance to get to the heart of her fear. I shifted in my seat, anticipating a deeper connection. In the next breath, the visiting pastor patted her hand and said, "No, no. You're not going to die. God isn't ready for you yet." She looked pleadingly toward him, as though he had some secret knowledge that negated what she knew to be true in her own body. Her sons quickly joined in, offering reassurances and platitudes instead of listening to what she desperately needed to share. The door she had opened was slammed shut because they were unwilling to risk the vulnerability that she was ready to show.

I'm not suggesting that we should be resigned in the face of a difficult diagnosis, as though imminent death is inevitable and there's nothing that we can do about it. We should hold on to life while we can. We pray for the outcome we want, even though we know what we

want isn't always possible. *But there are worse things than dying.* And God's promise is never to leave us nor forsake us, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

We are in the season of Easter, a time for proclaiming and celebrating the Resurrection. We are *Easter people*. But we also know – or at least we should – that there is no resurrection without death. Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.” According to the gospel writers, Jesus tried to speak to the disciples about his death at least three times. Each time, they either weren't listening or quickly changed the subject. Peter even had the audacity to try to reprimand Jesus for mentioning death (Matthew 16:22).

Yet Jesus was insistent. Even if the disciples wouldn't understand until after his death, he said what he needed to say to prepare them for life without him. But he did more than that. He had already demonstrated his power over death by raising Lazarus. Now he explained that what he was about to do would open the way to eternal life. Death would no longer have power over them...or us. The first word and the last word belong to Life. *That is the Good News!*

At the same time, we acknowledge that, at least in this life, death still holds some power over us. Even as Jesus spoke of the life to come, he experienced the anguish of facing his own death. “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” Death is not easy. It isn't for us, and it wasn't for Jesus. Death marks the end of a person's life and forever impacts those around them. It is a cleaving of relationship, sometimes a lifelong companionship. It marks the conclusion of the life we have known and the start of a different chapter, a chapter without that person in it. And though the promise of eternal life remains, *this* life is forever changed.

All the more reason we should talk about it. We can encourage one another with the faith that we share. We can prepare ourselves and one another for what is coming. And we can allow ourselves the vulnerability of naming our fears, facing them, and supporting each other as we walk through fear together.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. We expect that Jesus was speaking about himself, about the death he was about to face and the redemption his death and rising would gain for all of humanity. But perhaps he was also talking about us. This passage is one that is often read at the gravesite during a committal service. It is a reminder that even this moment that can seem so cold, so final, so hopeless, points toward a future hope and a promise in Christ. While we are in this life, it can feel like this is the only life there is, that only the present moment matters. But our faith tells us that there is more to come, a life beyond this life. Even the end is not really the end; it is a new beginning.

Death is hard. But we don't make it any easier by denying or ignoring it. Death is a part of life. Maybe if we learn to accept that, we can learn to fear it less. The story doesn't end at death, only the chapter. There is more to come after the page is turned.

There is a prayer that we pray at most funerals and memorial services at Church of the Saviour, including the one we held yesterday for Ele Richardson. It includes these words:

*Help us to live as those who are prepared to die.
And when our days here are accomplished,
may we die as those who go forth to live,
so that living or dying, our life may be in you,*

*and nothing in life or death
will be able to separate us
from your great love in Jesus Christ.*

The prayer includes Paul's testimony from Romans 8 that nothing, not even death, can separate us from God's love. It invites us not to fear death, but to live every day as if it were our last.

The love of God that binds us together transcends everything – even death. The love we have for one another remains even after our final breath. But let's not wait for the end to express what is on our hearts. We are Easter people who have a Resurrection Hope.

*Easter people raise your voices;
Sounds of heaven in earth should ring.
Christ has brought us heaven's choices;
Heavenly music, let it ring.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Easter people, let us sing.*

Amen.



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