

SPEAKING OF DEATH

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Camrose United Church
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Wisdom 1: 13-15, 2: 23-24 - God did not make death
Psalm 30 (*Voices United 757* - responsive reading)
Lamentations 3: 22-33 - The Lord will not reject forever
Mark 5: 21-43 - A girl restored to life and a woman healed

Today's scripture readings suggest a turn to the subject of death or suffering. We tend to avoid the subject a bit, but as a spiritual leader I consider it my responsibility to talk about death from time to time to give people some sense and guidance of how to be with what is perhaps one of the most important parts of our faith and our spiritual lives. I don't have much time left in this congregation so I thought I had better do one more sermon on the subject of death before I leave.

This passage from Wisdom which By [Reesor] read from the Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocryphal part of our Bible reflects a perpetual dilemma around death. The passage said God does not will or intend to create death, and what we hear is a particular moment in history when thinking was changing because there are other parts of our tradition, and even within the Bible, which talk about death as God's will. Now we could spend a whole day puzzling that theological issue, but we're not going to today. We're just going to listen to the kind of talk that was going on at the time of the Wisdom of Solomon saying death and suffering is not God's plan, not God's contrivance for us. That was important because in the sense of it being God's will it was seen as a punishment. And it is so important to get past that way of thinking about death.

And then from the Book of Lamentations there is a movement from the more theological thinking into the feelings that we have when loved ones die and when we face suffering in life.

A theme that occurs there is also reflected in Psalm 30 and in the Psalm that is the basis of the hymn we're going to sing at the end of the message--"Bringing in the Sheaves." That theme is that life goes through the cycle where there's a time of hurting and suffering, but God stays with us and takes us back into the moments of joy. That's wisdom and lament.

And then in the gospel we have this story of Jesus being approached by one of the leaders of the synagogue, Jairus, whose daughter is on the verge of death. What humility it would have taken for him to come to Jesus and say "My daughter is about to die. Come, come; I know that you can make a difference." And even as Jesus is on his way, people come and say "Forget it; she is already dead." Jesus reaches out and calls her to stand up and come back to life. We can interpret that in so many ways, but like so many of the stories of Jesus it can be seen as a reflection of our inner lives, of our spiritual lives--that something of us, some inner child in us, that dies in the course of our lives can be brought back to life in Christ.

So today I don't want to struggle with an understanding of death or a theology of death. There is certainly a time for that. But I want to reflect on how we speak of death. There's an important difference. How we talk about death is one thing, but that is different from our understanding or an analysis of death. There's much too much in how we talk about death and what there is to say to try to embrace it all in one simple message. So just for today I'm going to focus even more specifically on how we talk, or what we say, about how we die. We do talk about that. Of course we've also tried not talking about it. In our culture there has been a time when anything about death was really taboo. But we're all quite clear now that that doesn't work for us, spiritually, psychologically, or mentally. We know that we need to talk about death. And so we do, and we need to, and we need to learn how better to talk about death and about how we die. We're certainly afraid of it in some respects, but the fear only intensifies if we ignore it. Talking about it is a way to move beyond the fears, and so that's one of the reasons right there. But let me illustrate by sharing with you some of my thoughts about the ways we die. And it was really quite eye-opening for me because there is so much in so many different ways that we need to say about death.

One of the ways we die is from cancer. Only a few years, a decade or so, ago people used expressions like the "big C". It was almost taboo to talk about cancer. And yet we're learning how to do that now. And there is Alzheimer's. Like cancer, Alzheimer's can be so hard, last so long, and entail so much suffering. And yet what I've learned over the years as a pastor is that no matter how hard it is, we still need to push through and talk about how we are, how a person is in his or her soul. Mentally or physically one is certainly not well, and one is certainly not going to live long. But even in that context we can still talk about how it is in our souls. There have been times when I've talked with someone who is suffering and soon to die, and I've asked "How are you in your soul?" The person pauses for a moment, we talk, and what he or she is saying is "I'm well. I feel closer to God than I've ever been." That kind of talk is important.

We also die of heart diseases, and we need to talk about that because we have learned how much heart disease has to do with our lifestyle. It's partly a way of learning to live more healthily. Some of us, as death approaches, spend time in nursing homes and we need to talk about that because, well, because of the fifth commandment--honour your father and mother so that you may live long in the land to which the Lord is taking you. That commandment is actually not about five- and ten-year old children being obedient to their parents. It's actually about adult children honouring their aging parents. The consequence then becomes very obvious because people live long if we take care of them in their old age. We have so much to learn about how to care for people in their old age. That we are learning is demonstrated by some of the new extended-care facilities right here in Camrose. What a profound difference it makes for people to live in a facility that is more of a home than an institution.

We also need to talk about sudden death. Sudden death happens. Sometimes we say "what a blessing," but we know that death in this manner is harder in many ways. I remember a story, about a man and woman in their old age, that moved me so deeply. One day, sitting at the kitchen table, the woman suddenly keeled over. Her husband ran over, picked her up, and put her into the pickup truck--they were living on a farm--and took her to the hospital. She died soon after her arrival. The husband came back home,

the family was gathered around the same kitchen table, and he said to his sons and daughters: "This is a good day. This is the way I wanted her to go. There was no suffering and no indignity for her, and I got to be with her right to the last day of her life. I didn't have to leave her alone." So there is a way to talk even about sudden death.

Those are all ways of death that we accept somewhat readily, and they are close to home and familiar. But as we look beyond our own culture we see so much more that is so much harder. We see AIDS and we see starvation. This is also how we die, if by "we" we include the whole human family. In both of those cases we long and we work for an awakening of compassion within the human race because death doesn't need to come that way and we know it. But AIDS and starvation are very different because AIDS is so close. We may try to pretend it's not, but it is frighteningly close. Starvation for us in this part of the world, in this culture, is so, so far away. And yet we need to speak of them both.

There are new challenges as well. Today we are being told that we need to learn to speak of pandemic influenza. Oh, we don't know whether they are exaggerating it or not, and of course they don't know either. But the threat is there, it's new, it's not understood, and education is needed. And the only way to get past the fears is to talk about it. So we need to speak of that way of dying as well.

And then perhaps one of the most difficult ways of death that we have to talk about is war and violence. The wars seem far away, and yet there are our own people--Canadian forces--in combat zones or at least in threatened zones. But violence is not just war. There is domestic violence, violence on the streets, crime, and those are close to home. That, too, is a part of how we die. So we need to talk of those things.

We need also to talk of global warming far more urgently than any of us have come to realize yet, because scientists are now telling us very conclusively that things need to turn around in the next decade.

All of these are hard ways to talk about dying, but they are ways that we die in the future, in the past, in the present. It's hard even to hear that litany, isn't it--that list of causes. But we need to talk to each other. And that's how we overcome feeling so alone with it all, that's how we can get past the fears, overcome the fear of death, which is what Christ's intention is for us. And in Christ there is the courage; the courage is planted in us.

I think maybe in some ways it gets harder as I move on to the next part of the list. That's where we need to talk about suicide. Some of the most terrible are teen suicides. We've read about people saying we need to learn to bring that out in the open, understand it, and speak of it. And we have to say again and again that in the power of the risen Christ, in this faith that we have, we need not be afraid even to speak of suicide in our lives.

We also need to talk about nicotine and drugs and alcohol, because these--the whole range of addictions--are some of the ways we die, too. Addiction is that mysterious way by which we lose our freedom and become self-destructive. We certainly need to talk about that.

Now, this one is close to home and we do talk about it, but we need to know how to talk about it well. We die on waiting lists for hospital beds. We need to talk about it because we as a society need desperately to recover our compassion politically. And we can do that, but not without bringing a faithful courage to bear on that conversation.

We also die accidentally--by accidental death. Sometimes it is just a simple accident that no one could have prevented. But sometimes we use the term "accidental death" to describe something that really needs more attention. Years ago I had a funeral for a twenty-one year old girl who died on vacation in New Zealand. She was just walking home one evening and a drunk driver swerved into her and killed her. As I worked with the parents through the grief and the funeral sermon they made a special request. They asked that, when I filled out the burial register and came to that place that asks for the cause of death, I not write "accidental." Instead, they asked that I write "killed by a drunk driver" because we need to learn how to speak honestly.

How we speak about the ways we die! It's quite different from understanding theology, isn't it? But the way we talk is so close to our hearts. We need to talk about how we die so that we're not alone with our fears, and can move beyond our fears. It's a way of inviting Christ into our lives. It's the way in which the child can live again. But there's more, the most important part. There's more to the reason for talking about death because along with speaking of death we learn to speak of life differently. That's the power of the resurrection. When we embrace the reality of our mortality, when we truly look at the reality of death, then our lives look different, and it's that transformation that is the true grace and blessing in this.

For example, talking like "I need more time at the office" turns into "I need to spend more time with my family"; nobody on the death bed ever wished he or she had spent more time at the office. Talk like "working hard to get ahead" changes to "working hard to get along." "How can I get more wealth, prestige, and power?" becomes "What more can I give; how can I use my time, wealth, possessions, skills, to make life better for someone else, to make a real difference in the world?" Or "I wish my son (daughter, husband, wife, mother, father, sister, brother, friend) had not died so soon" turns into "I'm so grateful for the many good times we had." Learning to speak honestly of death changes regrets for opportunities we've missed and anger we have with ourselves for mistakes we've made, into the realization that every day is a new day full of new opportunities, and that all we can do, all we can ever do, is to live this day well.

And so, when we speak of death we are given courage to do so by the great story of our Biblical tradition that takes us all the way through to a God who lovingly accompanies us in life, in death, and in life beyond death. And with that we have courage to speak of death, to face death. In that way the child who lies dying, the child who is the hope of our future, who is the inner child in all of us, the child who would lead us into the kingdom of God, is brought back to life by the power of the living Christ.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor