

“To Live is Christ While to Die is Gain”

Philippians 1:21-26

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On this Memorial Day weekend, we find ourselves remembering those men and women in the military who died in the service of our country, particularly those who died in battle or as a result of wounds sustained from one. We honor them because we consider them having made the **ULTIMATE SACRIFICE** on behalf of a truly grateful nation. For years now, I've been privileged to speak or offer up prayers at many a Memorial Day service in my capacity as a minister. It's a civic function most pastors find themselves asked to perform **REGARDLESS** of whether they've been in the military or not. Although I never served **MYSELF**, just this past week our Navy son was deployed from Japan on what is the beginning of a six-month tour aboard the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Ronald Reagan*. He and his shipmates are now headed for what is currently one of the most dangerous regions in the world (where, as he explained, he was not at liberty to disclose). The fact is that **WHENEVER** they leave port, the risk of never returning safe and sound is **ALWAYS** a possibility. From the day they were inducted, they were taught the seriousness of their decision to join the armed forces and that **EVERY** mission undertaken was not without some clear and present danger to their lives.

Our New Testament lesson for this morning is from St. Paul's Epistle to the church at Philippi written while the author was confined to a Roman prison. From the moment of his conversion on the Damascus road, this “soldier for Christ” found himself inducted into the service of his Lord. From that moment on, he was made to understand that as part of **GOD'S** army, he'd been summoned to undertake a world-wide mission, one that involved the prospect of death on a daily basis. Over the intervening years, he had suffered beatings and stonings, was imprisoned and even shipwrecked in his defense of the Gospel. Now from his prison cell, he is acutely aware that his days on earth are numbered, that **MARTYRDOM** will be his calling.

Yet, **THROUGH IT ALL**, he had no fear of death, convinced that whether he **LIVED** or whether he **DIED**, it made no difference. You see, for him to **LIVE** meant living with Christ in this world and continuing the work his Lord had called him to, where **DYING** meant living in his personal presence. He understood that since his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus many years earlier, his life was no longer his own, that he belonged utterly to Christ. And he **ALSO** understood that if **WE** maintained that same truth in our **OWN** heart and mind, then like him, we would **ALSO** be free to live out that truth and demonstrate that reality with love and faith and courage **REGARDLESS** of whatever obstacles the world might throw in our path.

More than two centuries ago, it was the English writer Samuel Johnson who wrote how the prospect of death “wonderfully concentrates the mind.” In other words, when you know your time on earth is short, a conversion of sorts often takes place within one's brain and soul. You tend to appreciate life **A LOT MORE** and take extra pleasure from being around loved ones; you reflect on the many years you wasted, as well as realize just how fleeting, how ephemeral your accomplishments and the awards you won actually are. You also consider how if you only had the chance to do it all over again, there are many things you would now do **MUCH DIFFERENTLY**- if only you were given the opportunity all over again.

For instance, on a cold winter day in 1849, a 27 year-old Fyodor Dostoevsky, who years later would become world famous as the author of such classics as *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, was arrested by the Russian police and taken to a maximum-security prison for being a political revolutionary. Actually, he was not against the Russian government as he was against the cruelties of serfdom in which poor peasants suffered enforced servitude to large manorial estates. The conditions of his imprisonment were difficult and for eight months, he slept on hard straw beds in small, damp rooms without much light. During most of that time, he occupied himself by reading books of a spiritual nature, especially the Bible. On December 22, he and the rest of his group were removed from their cells and taken to a square and lined up on a gallows. The men were sentenced to be shot. They were given a cross to kiss, the chance to confess to a priest, and then were dressed in peasant shirts and hoods for the execution. The first three men in line were tied to stakes while the soldiers readied themselves to fire. Soon Dostoevsky heard a drum roll and realized that he--the sixth in line--along with his fellow prisoners, were to be saved. The tsar's messenger came riding into the square and read the pardon. He and his group were taken back to the prison and prepared for the long journey to a hard labor camp in Siberia.

This event was to have a lasting event on his life and influenced his writing for years to come. It not only reaffirmed and strengthened his religious belief but his close scrape with death gave Dostoevsky a new appreciation of life. He realized that IN SPITE of their condition, people can overcome the most oppressive circumstances and even be joyful through them. As a result, his philosophy became one of unconditional love and forgiveness- two moral values which struck him in the moments before his almost execution. For him, these morals were the "...supreme human consolation." He saw unconditional love as the ONLY hope for the future of the world. Thus, Dostoevsky's views changed from one of social revolution to a more spiritual level as he realized that though he could never change the past, he COULD alter the future. His stay of execution convinced him to spend the rest of his life telling others that human beings had the power to "...turn each moment into an eternity of happiness" regardless the circumstances. With this newfound attitude towards life, Dostoevsky was prepared to face his sentence of hard labor and Siberian exile with a new spiritual strength and a positive vision of the future.

I have a good friend—a former minister in my last Presbytery—who writes an online blog. In it, he's spoken many times as well as in our own conversations of what has become for him THE defining event in his life- what he calls "dancing with death." Several years ago, this pastor--now in his late 70's—came close to dying- once after having developed prostate cancer, and the other after a ten-foot fall from a ladder that left him in an intensive care unit for over month with a serious brain injury. Knowing the grim reaper lay just around the corner profoundly affected him and has allowed him to see things about himself and life he might not have known otherwise. It helped him to see that he was not immortal but FINITE and that our lives on this world are actually QUITE LIMITED. Hence, it enabled him to adopt as his credo a line from Mohandas Gandhi, "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever." He also discovered that dancing with death liberates you, that as one of his inspirations—Steve Jobs—once said in the middle of his OWN battle with life, "Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart." This realization has created a greater urgency for him to live life to the fullest and to try to leave as positive a mark on the world and ESPECIALLY ON THOSE HE LOVES as he can.

And one MORE example: Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and spiritual director whose writings have been nearly as influential as those by C.S. Lewis, had his OWN “dance with death” which he detailed in an article he entitled “A Glimpse Behind the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life.” On an icy winter morning, he was crossing the street when he was struck by the outside rearview mirror of a passing van which almost killed him. The ambulance arrived and took him to the emergency room of the local hospital where it was determined his condition was critical. After being transferred to the Intensive Care Unit, the truth began to sink in that he was in danger of actually DYING. It was then that he realized that there was something ironic about having been struck by the MIRROR of a passing van, that like all mirrors, it was forcing him to look at himself, but in a RADICALLY NEW WAY. Except for some brief, insignificant illnesses, he had never been in a hospital bed. BUT NOW, totally dependent upon the people around him, he found he could do nothing without help, that he had been rendered totally passive by the experience. Yet, through it all, he maintained an unexpected sense of well-being without any real sense of heightened anxiety.

Entering what he described as a zone or “portal” of death, he said he experienced something he had never experienced before- pure and unconditional love. More specifically, it was an INTENSELY PERSONAL and NON-JUDGING PRESENCE that pushed aside all his fears and simply asked that he trust it completely. He hesitated at first to say it was Jesus although he had spent his life teaching on and developing a close relationship with him. But as this presence took greater hold of him, he had NO DOUBT who it was- all ambiguity and uncertainty were gone. As he expressed it:

He was there, the Lord of my life, saying, “Come, don’t be afraid. I love you.” His presence was deeply human as well as deeply divine, very personal but so much greater than my imaginings. I knew without doubt that he was there for me, but also that he was embracing the universe. I knew he was the Jesus I had prayed to and spoken about, but also that now he did not ask for prayers or words. All was well.”

What summed it all up were the two words “life” and “love,” but words incarnated in a real presence. Death seemed to have lost all its power. He felt as if he was walking through a sea whose waves had been rolled away and he was being safely held as he moved toward the other shore. All jealousy, resentment, and anger were being gently removed and he was being shown that Love and Life are greater, deeper, and stronger than any of the forces he had been worrying about.

There were a set of conflicting emotions going on at the same time. On the one hand, it was as if Jesus was opening up his home to him and inviting him in saying, “Here is where you belong” It was a kind of return to the womb of God, the same God who had created him and fashioned him in his MOTHER’S womb. Yet, he also experienced a RESISTANCE to coming home. What was PREVENTING him was the conviction that he was still bound to his own old world by unresolved conflicts with people he knew. It was the PAIN OF FORGIVENESS that withheld him from his true destiny, that ANGER AND NOT LOVE was the thing that kept him clinging to life. LOVE AND LOVE ALONE would be the ONLY thing that would free him to die.

As he felt life weakening in him, he suddenly felt a deep desire to forgive and be forgiven, to let go of all evaluations and opinions, to be free from the burden of judgments. He said to a dear friend, “Please tell everyone who has hurt me that I forgive them from my heart,

and please ask everyone whom I have hurt to forgive me too...In case I die, tell everyone that I feel an immense love for all the people I have come to know, also toward those with whom I am in conflict. Tell them not to feel anxious or guilty, but to let me go into the house of my Father and to trust that there my communion with them will grow deeper and strong. Tell them to celebrate with me and be grateful for all that God has given me.” With that, he had given himself totally over to Jesus, feeling like a little chick safe under the wings of its mother.

In the days that followed his surgery, he began to discover what it meant that he had NOT died and would soon recover. On the one hand, he was glad to be alive but on a DEEPER level, he was confused and wondered why Jesus had not called him home. His main question was: “Why am I alive? Why has God asked me to return to a place where love is so ambiguous, peace so hard to experience, and joy so deeply hidden in sorrow?” TWO LESSONS from his near death experience stood out for him: proclaiming God’s love, and dying for others. FIRST, it seemed to him that in light of his “dance with death,” he had received a DEEPER and more INTIMATE knowledge of not belonging to this world. He was more convinced than ever that he was a child of God, a brother of Jesus, and that he was preserved in the intimacy of divine love. Once he had fully accepted that truth, he could then go into the world to speak and act as Jesus did. He saw as his great spiritual task was to trust so fully that he belonged to God that he could LIVE MORE FREELY in this world, as Steve Jobs HIMSELF had discovered in his OWN encounter with mortality. Nouwen could be free to speak even when his words were not received; free to act even when his actions were criticized, ridiculed, or considered useless; free also to receive love from people and to be grateful for all the signs of God’s presence in the world. He was convinced that he was able to TRULY love in the world when he fully believed that he was loved by One far beyond its boundaries.

The SECOND great realization he gleaned from his near-death experience was a deepened sense that he had been CALLED TO DIE FOR OTHERS. This is one of the ways to witness to God’s love with more than words. The critical difference has to do with HOW one dies, that if we die with much anger and bitterness, then we will leave our family and friends behind in confusion, guilt, and shame. Nouwen understood that if he could truly say he was grateful for what he had lived, eager to forgive and be forgiven, full of hope so that those who love him would continue their lives in joy and peace, he could, in the hour of his death, CREATE MORE TRUE SPIRITUAL FREEDOM than he had been able to create during all the years of his life. His near-death experience had in fact become A GIFT FROM GOD to help him realize with new intensity that DYING IS THE MORE IMPORTANT ACT OF LIVING. All of us are thus faced with two options in the hour of our death- either we can bind ourselves and others with GUILT, or be set free with GRATITUDE. This is a choice between A DEATH THAT GIVES LIFE and A DEATH THAT KILLS.

Awaking from his surgery and realizing that he was still in the world, he had a new sense of mission; it was an immediate sense of being sent- sent to make the all-embracing love of God known to people who hunger and thirst for love but who often look for it where it cannot be found. He realized that making God’s love is not primarily communicated through words or arguments but BY BEING A LIVING WITNESS of it. He also knew that without a conscious effort to keep God in the center of his heart, it wouldn’t be long before his hospital experience became little more than a pious memory. He now saw life as a long journey of preparation, of preparing oneself to truly die for others. It is a series of little deaths in which we are asked to move increasingly from CLINGING TO OTHERS to LIVING FOR THEM. It is learning to

understand that Jesus calls us to let go of everything and to trust him fully, and if we DO, then death will never be something for us to fear, that both living and dying find their TRUE meaning in the glory of the risen Christ who remains the Lord of the living AND the dead. Where he had understood this from an intellectual perspective, he now knew it PERSONALLY and that this urgency he now felt to share these lessons with others could be THE GREATEST GIFT HE COULD GIVE THEM.

The prophet Isaiah warned the Israelites that “all flesh is grass,” a sentiment St. Peter repeated in his own epistle: *“For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever.”* (1 Peter 1:24,25) Neither man meant that life is worthless or that it should be taken lightly, but that we all have but one life to live and that what we DO have remains EXTREMELY FRAGILE. For many, life is little more than eating and drinking and trying to get as much pleasure or enjoyment one can, WHILE one can. However, for CHRISTIANS, we realize the seriousness of each hour, that for us it becomes an “audition for eternity.” As one old preacher once put it to me, “THIS LIFE we now live is the GREATEST HEAVEN any sinner will ever experience, but the GREATEST HELL any child of God shall ever see.” Saint Paul, who had undergone one near-death experience after another throughout his life, put it more succinctly: “To live is Christ while to die is gain.” Likewise, Henri Nouwen, who had his OWN “dance with death,” gleaned in a moment of extreme weakness and utter helplessness his OWN understanding about the meaning of life and his place in it that proved far more valuable than any silver or gold.

Friends, on this Memorial Day Weekend, let me sum up what I hope YOU, as members of GOD’S OWN ARMY who have already DIED IN CHRIST and are now RISEN WITH HIM will memorialize or remember EVERY SINGLE DAY for the REST of your lives. I hope the lessons and the insights that these three men discovered through their “dance with death,” may, in turn, lead US to develop our OWN appreciation of life, that we recognize how WE are soldiers for Christ engaged in a daily battle against sin and death. May we understand the life we’ve been accorded is INDEED a fragile gift and must be undertaken with the utmost seriousness. May we see that our ULTIMATE commitment must be to JESUS CHRIST ALONE who remains the basis of all our confidence and all our strength. And FINALLY, may we discover the truth that Nouwen HIMSELF did with such clarity, that DYING IS THE MORE IMPORTANT ACT OF LIVING. To live is to recognize that we are ALSO IN THE PROCESS OF DYING- not ONCE but EVERY SINGLE DAY, and that AS we die, all of us are faced with TWO OPTIONS- either we can bind ourselves and others WITH GUILT, or we can be set free WITH GRATITUDE. It is the choice between A DEATH THAT GIVES LIFE and A DEATH THAT KILLS, but a choice which remains solely OUR OWN, a decision each of us must ultimately make for OURSELVES. Amen and amen.