

## **Let's Talk About Death - It Won't Kill Us**

I Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-49 by Patty Friesen (Feb. 24/19)

I just came back from Canadian Mennonite University Pastors' Week on Death and wanted an opportunity to speak about death at a faspa on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent that reminds us of our mortality. I thought it would all be theoretical, knowing we would be impacted by death at some point but not in church on a Sunday morning! Art has given us a final gift of service in that his death opens up our hearts and conversation as we find our way through this experience.

The first thing we know about death is that it comes to us naturally. It comes to our bodies whose arteries harden as we age. It comes to our bodies when they are damaged in accidents and illness. Death comes because we have bodies, flesh, bone and blood that is vulnerable to natural causes of biological sickness and injuries. Hearts stop beating, lungs stop breathing, bodies die. As people have kept telling me all week, "death is a part of life." And people know that who have lived long enough to see all kinds of deaths of their loved ones - blessedly old and tragically young.

But for people my age and younger, death is still a new experience for us and for some of us, Art's death here last Sunday was our first ever death experience and one we will never forget. I'm grateful for parents who quickly comforted their children but didn't whisk them out of church to prevent them from this painful but important communal grief experience. I'm thankful for Terri Lynn and Lynette's ministry to them during Sunday school and for this morning's children's time. I'm grateful for Lynette's idea to sing Art out the front door of the church and the children who joined us for this incredible experience. We will continue to walk our children through this as best we

can. I'm grateful for the children and adults who hug me and comfort me. We've never hugged so much as last Sunday. We should do it more!

And that's the second thing we know about death - that it actually is *more* than a natural process in which the body dies. We are more than our bodies - we have unique and individual and amazing personalities and thoughts and spiritual connection to our Creator that make us who we really are. When our bodies die, hearts stop beating and lungs stop breathing - we immediately change looks - we don't look like ourselves. I've seen enough dead bodies in my work to know that who we are inside seems to shape how we look outside and God bless Ryan and Stefan Funk. They can make our bodies look mostly like ourselves but not quite. And we know it as soon as we see our loved ones in the casket. We know our loved one is really gone and all is left is their beloved bodies. Our souls together with our bodies make us who we are. Death is a spiritual experience as well as a physical one. I'll talk more about that in a bit.

The third thing about death is that it is a communal experience. From the beginning of time, humans have gathered around their loved ones who have died and have practiced some kind of burial and religious rituals to help them with the physical and spiritual aspects of death. Petroglyphs and cave paintings portray images of death rites and burial sites are loaded with artifacts commemorating the person who died. We have burial mounds at Wanuskewin that date 6000 years. Other world renown burial sites are the Egyptian pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the Holy Scepulcher in Jerusalem. We are the first generation in human history to not have funeral services at the request of the one who has died. I understand that people do not want to be a burden or an expense to their families and so request no funerals but as we've been saying all week,

“funerals aren’t for those who have died - they are for those of us who live to have a way of saying good-bye and helping us through these powerful physical/spiritual experiences.” Art wouldn’t have wanted all this fuss we’re making over his death but as I said at his funeral - the fuss is for us! And Art would have laughed at that because he enjoyed play on words!

The fuss is for us. What do we need to process death - to grieve it, to help us say good-bye and move into a new life without our loved one? Grief is complex and unique to each one of us as individuals. No two people grieve the same and I would never tell another how to but this is how my grief acted in a physical way this week. The first thing on coming to church and hearing the news of Art’s death was that I stopped breathing myself. Shock is like getting the air knocked out of you. All morning I had to tell myself to breathe deep and have to still do that today. When we cry, we quickly get dehydrated and then get headaches so drinking water is important in grief. I felt heavy so very heavy - couldn’t lift the shovel to shovel that day but then I resented snow and shovels and I don’t think there will be any in heaven! Then despite desperate exhaustion - I couldn’t sleep - haven’t slept more than 4 hours a night and haven’t been able to nap either - that’s unusual for me. Can’t breathe, dehydrated, can’t sleep and can’t concentrate. I’ve purchased grief books for the church library and their small and short because the authors know grieving people can’t concentrate. These are the physical symptoms we have to pay attention to and we can help ourselves by drinking plenty of water, going for walks or doing stretches to help tension tightness.

The emotional aspects of grief - whatever psychologists used to say about grief stages moving through denial, anger, bargaining doesn’t really work. Grief is a

thunderstorm that sits on the horizon and cracks over our head loudly sometimes and sometimes just sits. We feel sad and have to let it out somehow. I've got a Death CD I call it - Lux by Voce 8 - an amazing acapella choral CD that cracks me open and let's the tears come. That or watching the deaths in Downton Abbey. I have to force tears sometimes because I hold them in tightly in my work so I can function in public settings and then it hits me sideways if I haven't tended to my emotions as well as I've tended to my physical symptoms of grief. Sadness, anger. I was glad Patrick is on sabbatical and Stephanie away on spring break because I was loud in both sadness and anger this week and talking to death out loud. I didn't realize I was talking to death out loud until my neighbour was looking at me while I was shovelling. This is how the rage with death went...

Death you are such a jerk. What do you think you were doing coming to church this morning and scaring the living daylight out of us?! Why don't you stay put in long term care where you belong and are wanted. Stop interfering with the lives of people who aren't actually finished with life yet. You are such a jerk. (It helped me to yell all that anyhow:). What also helped was phone calls from my mom, Patrick, friends and church people. It helped to gather here as Oslerites for breakfast with Edna and Kelly Monday morning to continue to grieve together and laugh at the three guys that wore the same shirt to breakfast - a Costco special apparently. I needed that laugh.

The spiritual aspects of grief - this is where I tread lightly. I've been to enough horrible funerals where ministers laid it on thick about the afterlife and how grandchildren better accept Jesus before it's too late. I believe this is religious abuse - preying on the emotions of grieving people and is unethical. While I believe in the

importance of inviting people to a rich life with Christ - I believe there are gentler ways and better times to do it. I believe that images of Christ's own grief and the grief of others in scripture are gentle ways that allow us to grieve. The psalms particularly are the best liturgical resource we have for grief in the congregation and we used one this morning in our call to worship. I'm not sure streets of gold language and "he is in a better place" language are helpful in the grief process. All I know is that when my dad died - I didn't see any streets of gold. It was the most peaceful, organic experience that left me feeling peaceful with being uncertain about lies beyond, and not actually needing streets of gold for comfort but others may. We'll talk more about that at our Ash Wednesday fasma.

The last thing I will say about grief is that it triggers other grief. For example, my grief over Art's death twigs my grief over my dad's death who would be Art's age. And I know this because my grief over Art, as much as I appreciated him, is a little over the top, so I think I'm still grieving Dad. Does that make sense?

OK this is enough for today. We will walk with each other these next weeks and months and care for Edna whose kids live away and care for each other. Let's pray...