

Dying for Beginners

Mark 15:33-41 By Patty Friesen Memorial Sunday, November 24, 2024

Mother with sleeping child slide. In our scriptures this morning Jesus teaches us how to die. Jesus is not depicted as a heroic martyr with his eyes firmly focused on heaven in death. Instead, Jesus identifies completely with the suffering associated with death. Jesus teaches us that it's OK to lament death and ask God - Why me and why have you abandoned me? He shows us that we need human witnesses to our death. The centurion who executed Jesus, had witnessed a lot of death but is humbled by this one. The women witness of Jesus's death are named as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome. This is the first time Mark's gospel actually names the women disciples. They sit and watch with Jesus so he is not alone.

Sitting and watching with the dying is something that chaplains do as Chaplain Kerry Egan recounts in her book *On Living* (Riverhead, 2016). One day her son said, "Mommy, when you are finished at work making people die, can we go out for ice cream." Kerry says, "For the record, I don't make people die." Few people actually know what chaplains do. Egan recounts this conversation about her work a professor at her divinity school. "What do you do at the cancer hospital?" he asked. "I talk to patients," I told him. "You talk to patients? Tell me, what do people who are sick and dying talk to the student chaplain about?" He asked. All I could come up with was "Mostly we talk about their families."

"Do you talk about God?" "Umm, not usually." "Or their religion?" "Not so much." "The meaning of their lives?" "Sometimes." And do you lead them in prayer? "Well." I hesitated. "Sometimes. But not usually, not really."

Today, more than fifteen years later, if you were to ask me the same question - What do people who are sick and dying talk about with the chaplain? I would give you the same answer: Mostly, they talk about their families, their mothers and fathers, their sons and daughters.

They talk about the love they felt and the love they gave. Often, they talk about the love they didn't receive or the love they didn't know how to offer, or about the love they withheld or maybe never felt for the ones they should have loved unconditionally.

They talk about what they learned what love is and what it is not. And sometimes, when they are actively dying, fluid gurgling in their throats, they reach out their hands to things I cannot see and they call their parents' names: Mama, Daddy, Mother.

What I didn't understand when I was a student, and what I would explain to that professor now, is that people talk to the chaplain about their families because that is how we talk about God. That is how we talk about the meaning of our lives. That is how we talk about the big spiritual questions of human existence.

We don't live our lives in our heads, in theology and theories. We live our lives in our families: the families we are born into, the families we create, the families we make through the people we choose as friends. This is where we create our lives, this is where we find meaning, and this is where our purpose becomes clear.

Family is where we first experience love and where we first give it. It's probably the first place where we've been hurt by someone we love, and if we're fortunate, it's the place where we learn that love can overcome even the most painful rejection. This crucible of love is where we start to ask those big spiritual questions, and ultimately, it's where they end.

I have seen such expressions of love. A husband who gently washes his wife's face with a cool washcloth, cupping the back of her bald head in his hand to get to the nape of her neck

because she is too weak to lift it from the pillow. A daughter spooning pudding into the mouth of her mother, a woman who has not recognized her for years. A wife arranging the pillow under the head of her husband's no-longer-breathing body before she helps the undertaker lift him onto the waiting stretcher.

The meaning of our lives cannot be found in books or lecture halls or even churches or synagogues. It's discovered through these acts of love. If God is love, and I believe that to be true, then we learn about God when we learn about love. The first, and usually the last, classroom of love is the family.

The remarkable thing about this crucible of love is that the love we experience in our families doesn't have to be perfect. In fact, it can't be perfect, because none of us is perfect. Sometimes, that love is not only imperfect, it seems to be missing entirely. Monstrous things happen in families...Even in these cases, I am amazed at the strength of the human soul. Even the people who did not know love in their families know that they should have been loved. They somehow know love by its absence. They somehow know what was missing and what they deserved as children and adults.

When the love is imperfect or a family is destructive, something else can be learned: forgiveness. The spiritual work of being human is learning how to love and how to forgive. That work is the gift we give each other, for there is little in this world people long for more than to be loved and to be forgiven by their mothers and fathers, daughters and sons. (p. 25-30)

Many of us have experienced the deaths of our parents and grandparents and some of us heartbreakingly - the deaths of our middle-aged children. There is nothing that prepares us for these separations and the emotional roller-coaster that follows them. I'm thankful for this opportunity on Memorial Sunday to talk about death outside of funerals. There are few places in

society where we can talk about death and it's meaning for our lives and I'm glad church is one of those places. The more we talk about it, perhaps the more equipped we are when it comes time for us to go through it with our loved ones and the more resources we have for comfort and strength in the midst of our grief. As in funerals, we need to gather together and hear scriptures and songs of comfort. We need today's ritual of lighting candles and saying the names of our loved ones aloud.

As Anna-Marie posted on Facebook "I hope death is like being carried to your bedroom when you were a child and fell asleep on the couch during a family party. I hope you can hear the laughter from the next room." Most of us say we are not afraid of being dead - we're just afraid of the dying process. Dr. Kathryn Mannix's work on Dying for Beginners, (YouTube video) gently describes the dying process. She says, just like being born, dying is a process our bodies go through quite naturally with recognizable stages that are the same for just about everyone. It's all very ordinary. At first our bodies grow more weary. We need more sleep, less food and we may lose our appetite altogether. Some days we can manage an outing, or visitors, or watching TV. Other days we mainly sleep. All this is normal. Inside our weary bodies, changes are happening. All our systems are running out of energy. Digestion slows down. Our heart may not pump as strongly. Our organs might slow down. All normal. Aside from the physical, dying people's perspective often shifts from themselves to others. The same last messages: Sorry. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.

Most people are not conscious by the time they die. We don't know when we're unconscious. We don't notice time passing or feel our body. It doesn't feel like going to sleep, it's just a state of non-awareness. To begin with, dying people might only be unconscious some of the time. In between, they may wake up and talk, or sip drinks or listen to the people around

them chatting. That's normal. They may become a bit muddled or restless. It helps when people hold their hand and talk in soothing gentle tones. Familiar trusted voices calm and comfort. Unconscious people breathe in an unusual way. Their breathing pattern gradually changes backwards and forwards between deep and shallow and between fast and slower breaths. This is normal and they can make unusual noises. If their breath vibrates their voice box, it might sound like a sigh or a moan. Sometimes their breath gurgles or rattles. It's not uncomfortable. It's a completely normal part of dying.

Hearing is the last sense to go. That's why loved ones and caregivers can keep talking while the dying person is unconscious. It's why some people make end of life playlists. What about the moment of dying? Well, it's usually very gentle. Our breathing gets slower and more shallow. And then it just very gently stops. A few minutes later our heart stops too. That's it. No fuss, or fear, or panic.

Of course, saying goodbye to people we love is sad but knowing what to expect takes away a lot of the fear. So many bereaved people wish they had talked about dying more. I've never met a person who regretted having those important conversations. We need to talk about it, because talking about death will help us to live together better. End quote (Dying for Beginners video by Dr. Kathryn Mannix)

Let us pray: Thank you our God who watches over us from our birth to our death. Thank you that you give us witnesses to our lives and to our deaths and that we are never alone. Give us peace in this day of memory of our loved ones as we light candles and say their names aloud. We thank you for their lives and what they meant to us. Amen.