

## Dying Well: The Last Act of Discipleship

Rev.1:4b-8 by Patty Friesen (Memorial Sunday, Nov.22/15)

It has been a month of remembrance with Remembrance Day and now on the last Sunday of the year before Advent, Memorial Sunday. In a death-denying culture, I'm glad the church schedules in one Sunday a year to talk about death. We already had a Death Sunday this summer as the Gospel of John led us to Jesus's death and Dr. Alan Reese from Nutana Park talked openly about his impending death. Alan is only 60 years old and has recently been diagnosed with Stage 4 colorectal cancer, which has metastasized to his lungs and liver. Any treatment would be palliative. He is reconciled to the fact that he is dying and he is putting his energy into making his death good for his soul and those he will leave behind. It seems like the closer he gets to death, the more he talks about it. He has shared in adult Sunday School at Nutana and has preached the sermon he preached here in Osler. I've never met anyone more open about death. Alan understands dying well as his last act of discipleship.

We are all dying. Since turning 50 this summer, that has become more of a reality for me in the condition known as [*pause slightly*] being human. There is no treatment for this progressive affliction. Each year there is more grey hair, more paunch in the belly, more wrinkles in the mirror, more pain in the joints and now progressive lenses. The evidence is before me—I am dying. Slowly, or not so slowly for all I know, I am dying. And guess what? You are dying as well. It is true. The statistics are clear: mortality rates for homo sapiens is 100%. Some of us will die this year, some next, some in the decades ahead. But the truth is that we are all dying.

Many people fear death, and it is this fear of death that handicaps faithful living and dying. Great sums of money are spent each year in attempt to defy or post-pone death: creams

to smooth wrinkles, pills to reduce weight, gel to color grey hair, surgeries to eliminate sag, treatments to post-pone death one additional week at massive costs. We can hardly speak the words death or dying. There are countless euphemisms for death which reflects society's reluctance to speak of death: Sie ist Heim gegangen (she has gone home), he passed away, she has gone to her eternal rest, he is now with his maker, she is pushing up the daisies, he kicked the bucket, and so on. It seems we can't even utter the words death and dying. Dread of death is a part of our culture. Fear of death circumvents saintly living. For this reason the pervasive and perverse fear of death must be challenged.

As Christians we are well suited to do so. Christianity actually has quite a number of tools in the shop that help us become reconciled to our mortality. This reconciliation with death, in turn, helps us live and die courageously. **Creation** helps us come to terms with death. The **Christ** story transforms the way we view death. The **community of faith** helps us transition through death. Creation, Christ, and the Community are just three of the gifts our spiritual tradition offers us in overcoming a fear of death. Let us first consider Creation.

### **Creation**

Since God has formed the created order (Gen 1.1) and since through Jesus Christ all things were created (John 1.3; Col 1.15-16), it is my belief Creation has something to teach us. The seasons with their cycles of birth and death were created in Christ. The re-birth of grass and flowers and trees we experience every spring was created in him. Life, death, resurrection are the cycles of nature because they are the cycle of Jesus Christ. If we avoid consideration of the spiritual insights offered in nature we will be ignoring one dimension of Christ's ministry to us. And nature, when we consider it, should soften our concerns about death.

Once Patrick and Alan were visiting in Alan's home while watching trees and sky through his front window. At one point conversation moved to the way God is comforting him through nature. He pointed to a tree and a leaf that was falling from it. He said to me, "Look at the tree. It is beautiful. The leaves drop to the ground. The leaves decompose during the winter releasing minerals and nutrients that will feed the next generation of the tree. I am, we are all, a little bit like those leaves. We are individuals and yet bound together in the tree called the body of Christ. Autumn comes for us all. Our time comes and we fall to the earth. We die but our death is not the end. We continue to nurture the body of Christ even as we have been nurtured by those who came before us and died before us. It is a comfort to watch the tree and all of God's creation". Alan's reflections made me think of Rainer Rilke poem entitled Autumn (Patrick's translation).

Autumn

Herbst

The leaves are falling, falling as if from afar, [Die Blätter fallen, fallen wie von weit,]  
as if the distant gardens in the heavens have grown tired. [als welkten in den Himmeln ferne  
Gärten;]

They fall with a resigned gesture. [sie fallen mit verneinender Gebärde.]

And in the nights the heavy earth falls [Und in den Nächten fällt die schwere Erde]

away from all stars into solitude. [aus allen Sternen in die Einsamkeit.]

We all fall. [Wir allen fallen.]

This hand here falls. [Diese Hand da fällt.]

And look at others: [Und sieh dir andre an:]

so it is with everything. [es ist in allen.]

And yet there is One, [Und doch ist einer,]  
who with infinite gentleness, [welcher dieses Fallen unendlich sanft]  
holds all this falling in his hands. [in seinen Händen hält.]

Any student of the created order would tell us that dimensions of life as we know it continue after death. Creation, the creation knit from the very essence of Jesus Christ, testifies that we need not fear death. We who wear the name Christian, though, have more than the natural world pointing us in this resurrection direction. We have the story of Jesus.

### **Christ**

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ changes things for us. We simply have no business being afraid of death. Being afraid of those things leading up to death I can understand. Being afraid for loved ones who will continue after our death I can understand. But being afraid of death itself is not knowing what we know. In his death, Jesus put death to death (1<sup>st</sup> Cor 15.26). Christ's resurrection should have the effect of unchaining us from fear of death. This means we can live bravely, die bravely, and anticipate a resurrection.

On this business of living bravely I offer you a quote from St. Justin who was a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian philosopher and martyr. In response to a wave of persecution Justin told the Roman authorities: "You can kill us but you cannot do us any real harm" (quoted in Robert Ellsberg's *All Saints*, p.168). He had studied the life of Jesus and understood that death, even a horrible death like Jesus endured (public and painful), has no hold over us. When we recognize that death can do us no real harm we are emboldened to live with brave compassion in service to God and neighbour.

When we recognize that death can do us no real harm we are emboldened to die with courage. The Jesus story encourages us in our dying because we know we are not alone in it.

Christ has identified with us. He goes with us through all things, and offers his very Spirit to live well and die well. The author of Hebrews puts it well: “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are...Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (4.15-16). This image of a generous Jesus willing to aid us in our times of need stands in contrast to the image some have of a harsh and judgemental God. Tragically, some fear death because they fear God. It is important for us all to remember that “if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all that is not right” (1<sup>st</sup> John 1.9). When we have been attentive to confession, and making things right, death need not be feared. The Risen Christ, the Good Shepherd, walks with us through green pastures and through the valley of the shadow of death.

### **Community**

The church is also a resource in transforming the way we think about death. Consider our scripture for this morning. Whatever we think of Revelation, in its weird and wonderful way it is bringing consolation of union in Christ and in the body of Christ in death for the martyred early church and it is that confident proclamation that we still hold to ourselves today.

Community is where we proclaim scripture and where we sing. Text and tune placed together often resonates within us in ways that go beyond words. By the time your “mittagschope” is finished this afternoon you will in all likelihood have forgotten most of my sermon. It is a good sermon, I think, but we just don’t often remember the details of more public presentations. The hymns of the morning, though, these will stick with you. If you are anything like me you the hymns of a given worship service go with me well into the week. This is not to diminish the importance of preaching, just simply recognizing that there is a power in music

which goes beyond the preached word. And the hymns for today, help us face death well. These songs of our faith help us face death well.

This brings us back to Alan and his death. “There is a path to holiness that lies within our individual circumstances, that engages our own talents and temperaments, that contends with our own strengths and weaknesses, that responds to the needs of our own neighbors and our particular moment in history” (Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints*, p.476). Alan’s fate is to respond faithfully in the wake of incurable cancer. To face what Alan will in the next months he needs to tell his story. We, our faith community, need to hear his story. It gives Alan courage and it gives us hope. Is Alan a saint? No, but his faithfulness in approaching his death has saintly overtones. We will not forget his decision to forgo chemotherapy on account of the costs benefit ratio in his case. We will not forget his decision to make things right with the people of his life. We will not forget his decision to grapple publically with his death so that we all might grow in the wisdom of our Lord. We need not fear death, so let us live well. We need not fear death, so let us die well. Let us anticipate the resurrection and renewal that awaits us. Amen.