

“Die, so that you may live”

September 13, 2009

Text: Isaiah 50:4-9a, Mark 8:27-38

I.

Ecclesiastes is one of the wisdom books of the Hebrew Scriptures. It’s a sort of existential, philosophical reflecting on life. The writer, whoever he was, obviously had a wide range of human experience. In chapter three, we find these timeless and poetic words which we often hear at Memorial services or Funerals.

For everything there is a season, and a time for everything under the sun ...a time to be born and a time to die ... a time to plant and a time to pluck up what has been planted ... a time to weep and a time to laugh ...

The author goes on in this way covering all the contrasting *experiences* of our human existence—*a time to keep and a time to throw away ... a time to be silent and a time to speak* But he sets the stage with the first contrast: *a time to be born and a time to die.* Indeed, this is our human situation.

Questions of life and death surround us every day of our lives. If we think about it, how can this NOT be? We want to live ... and we’re concerned about our well-being and the well-being of our loved ones.

It’s in this context, of course, that the national debate on Health Care is so important to us, along with the wars we find ourselves mired in in Iraq and Afghanistan. In war, people die ... every day. Without high quality health care, people die as well.

For our part—something we can all agree on—we want to live, straight and simple.

Three friends were discussing death one day and one of them asked, matter-of-factly: ***What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?***

Actually, that’s a compelling question, a topic worthy of serious reflection.

The first guy said: *I would want them to say, **he was a great humanitarian, a man who really cared about his community, an outstanding public servant.***

The second fellow said, *I’d want them to say, **he was a great husband and father, a wonderful family man, a model citizen for others to emulate and follow.***

Finally, when it came to the third man, without hesitating, he said, *What I’d like them to say about me is: **Look, he’s moving!***

There's an innate impulse in all of us to want to live and to believe we're going to live, even when sickness comes upon us. We always want to think we're going to make it; we want to live.

II.

This was certainly part of what **Peter** was expressing in his encounter with **Jesus** from the reading I just shared from Mark's gospel.

In the first part of the reading, Jesus is struggling with his own identity, wondering who he is. If we think about, from a human point of view, how could he not? He probably has some sense, as we all do, but he's wondering what people think of him: ***Who do people say that I am,*** he asks?

Pausing briefly, they answer him: ***Well, some say you are John the Baptist ... others think you're Elijah ... and still others say you're one of the prophets.***

Good enough, says Jesus, *but who do you say that I am?* He wants to know what they think. And right away, Peter—always eager to jump in—says: ***You are the Messiah!***

A short time later—again, wrestling with his identity ... and no doubt full of many thoughts and wonderings about who he is—Jesus begins to talk to his disciples about his own, personal suffering and death.

Understandably, the disciples are upset about this and, right away, Peter pulls Jesus aside and tells him *not to say such things*. Jesus rejects Peter's rebuke saying to him, essentially, that he doesn't understand. And of course, he doesn't. How could he, this side of the resurrection?

Peter's concern and despair, really, is the concern and despair of all of us: ***Why does this have to be?***

On some level, isn't this the cry, the protest, of all humanity? ***Why does this have to be?*** Why do we have to die? Why can't we live forever? This was **Zorba the Greek's** protest, near the end of his vigorous and active life when he said—this man of an enormously robust spirit:

Men like me should never die. We should live ten thousand years!

III.

Why does this have to be?

All of our faith traditions recognize, at some point, that coming to terms with the reality of human suffering and death is the key to human freedom.

- The prophet, **Muhammad** said, *Die before you die.*
- The Sufi mystic **Rumi** said, *Lose your life, if you seek eternity.*

In Mark, trying to explain this to the disciples, Jesus says:

For those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

In the gospel of John, speaking metaphorically about his passion, Jesus says,

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

All the great religions of the world seem to understand that death is a wisdom teacher ... that there is something in our dying that teaches us how to live and how to be more alive in the here and now.

IV.

Both our dying and our living are part of our larger life in God. In that sense, they are sacred. They go together. In order for God to be more fully present to us ... to live in us in ways that fill us more abundantly with God's presence, we have to, first, die to ourselves; which means, to our inborn tendencies to excess—to greed, pride and self-centeredness ... to thinking that it's all about us.

Friends—get this: physical death is NOT the enemy. The enemy is spiritual death; it is life apart from God and, therein, apart from our brothers and sisters. It is an absence of love, an absence of compassion and kindness and generosity of spirit.

We're called to **die in order to live** so our self-interest and inborn tendency to think too much in terms of our own needs can be transcended.

Death is a humble but powerful reminder that we don't control life. Although we're all loved infinitely by God, still, it's not just about us as individuals. It's about us as members of the human family ... as members of community ... members of planet earth.

God is most fully alive in us when we are alive to one another—with compassion and kindness, with forgiveness and mercy ...

- looking out for one another ... seeking ways of bringing people together ...
- reaching out to those on the outside ... to the little ones ... the ones without adequate housing, education, health care ... whatever it is ...

That's why social justice is such a top priority—in our church and in the wider life of our denomination, the *United Church of Christ*.

V.

When we *die so that we may live*, we come to a deeper understanding of what it means to be alive to the fullness of God that is within us. God's presence throbs in our being when we realize—in our mind, heart but mostly in our gut—that we belong to God ... every one of us ... every human being.

I don't know about you, but I'm tired and weary of hearing—every day—of people without adequate health care, people without quality education, people losing their homes to foreclosure; people losing their jobs, not knowing where to turn.

I'm tired and weary of the endless contentiousness, hatefulness, even, that has become a poison in the soul of our nation in recent years. A poison that continues to fuel the bitter and sadly partisan debate on Health Care Reform; a poison that leads to an utter lack of civility and decency, as we saw this past week in the Congress of the United States.

This air of divisiveness and polarization is getting worse, not better. And if we tell the truth, friends, there a deep seeded ugliness out there that's fueling it. You know what I mean! And the people cry out, How long, Lord, how long? How long, indeed?

The point is: we can do better. We MUST do better. We must find the moral resolve to rise above some of the shameless clamor out there.

When we *die so that we might live*, we're free from all the clutter and superficiality of the world ... free from all the sin that weights us down—the greed, self-centeredness, the phobia of this, the phobia of that ... free from all the smallness and pettiness.

VI.

This is a tough scripture for us this morning, a reminder again that we gotta give up stuff, make sacrifices, compromise, share—whatever it takes. That's what *losing our lives for the sake of the gospel* means. What it also means is that the status quo in times of widespread deprivation and hardship does not cut it with God.

The discrepancy in income and privilege between those at the top and those at the bottom in our nation has grown exponentially over the last three decades. This is NOT unrelated to our current crises in health care, education and our long list of economic woes.

In many ways, friends, we're in the maelstrom of a moral challenge in our nation. Our challenge—very simply—is to do the right thing. As we continue to wrestle with this

moral challenge, Jesus' words about *losing our lives to find our lives* don't let us off the hook.

In many ways, our struggle with Health Care Reform is a microcosm of a whole range of challenges before us. Again, our moral challenge: do the right thing, with love as our guiding principle.

I close with these words from Second Isaiah, **Isaiah 51**, words of hope to a people in exile:

*Listen to me, you who know righteousness,
you people who have my teaching in your hearts;*

*Do not fear the reproach of others,
And do not be dismayed when they revile you.*

*For the moth will eat them up like a garment,
And the worm will eat them like wool,*

*But my deliverance will be forever,
And my salvation to all generations.*

And so, let's rise up, America, and let's do the RIGHT thing. Let's ascend to the moral high ground ... and BE the faithful people God calls us to become. Let us, indeed, take up our cross and follow Christ.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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