

Graduation Day
Ecclesiastes 3:1-2
Revelation 14:13
Philippians 1:20-24
August 21, 2022

Rev. Robert R. Howard
Community Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tempe, AZ

Remember, a few years ago, when the world witnessed former President Jimmy Carter announce that the cancer on his liver had metastasized to his brain? We watched him talk about his mortality with dignity, grace, and even some humor. And we saw a testimony to a deep faith in God which sustains him: “I’m perfectly at ease with whatever comes,” Mr. Carter said, “I do have a deep religious faith, which I’m very grateful for.”(1) Now, whatever any of us have thought of the man, we can behold here the mystery of faith which reaches beyond the tides of living, even the shoals of dying, and touches the very source of our life. We can allow ourselves to be reminded of the Christian vision that our end is not *the* End. And maybe we can catch some of that confidence in Christ.

Well, truth is, we are born onto a path which relentlessly ends in our dying. That’s the fact of life. So as a fellow human traveler, I speak as a dying man to other dying people today. We don’t know when, most of us; we don’t know where, or how – but we can be certain *that* we shall share that fate common to us all. We’ve launched into a series of sermons exploring some of the issues which circulate around the human realities of death and dying, grief and loss, and our faith in God through Jesus Christ. Today we shall think together about our own *dying as an act of faith*. What might it mean to say, not just, “I am dying,” but “my dying can become a witness to God”? Now, this may sound like complete nonsense to some. But I wonder. I just sat right up in my chair once, totally blown away, when I read this little slice from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. You know, you’re reading your Bible, just plowing through it dutifully, doing your devotions like a good little Christian. And then suddenly a verse grabs you and shakes you, rubs your nose in God, and you are just never the same. Maybe some here have had that experience. You can’t plan it: today I’ll have a profound God-experience at 9:23 AM. Then I’ll take another sip of my latté. Uh-uh. Doesn’t work that way. It’s more often like, you trip across a root God placed in your way. And that’s what happened to me. Paul is writing to his beloved friends in the small church in Philippi. See him pacing back and forth in his jail cell: “I haven’t decided. I’d prefer to be with Jesus, of course. But, then, I need to be with you. I am hard-pressed between the two. I just can’t decide...” What! What! Can’t decide? You are in *jail*, sir! You are *stuck*! What do you mean, “you can’t decide?” You have no *power* to decide. You are at Rome’s mercy. What kind of foolish — and then it hit me. Yes, Paul is imprisoned. Immobile. Totally at the mercy of others. And yet . . . in Christ, he is free in *any* situation. Not just, “you can choose your attitude” – he has the power to choose his *actions*. Even behind prison bars, Christ’s power opened a door for Paul. That’s what hit me. Christ will open *any* closed door for any of us. Even the door called “my life’s end.” We may not be able to control the *fact* of our dying. But, by Heaven, we *can* decide *what we make of it*! By Christ’s power in us.

So, how does a person die? Not so much, what happens to the body,(2) but how do people handle it? One event – ten thousand ways to deal with it. What are some ways that folks actually

handle the act of *dying*? Well, some just bury their heads in the sand, of course. In 1973, Ernest Becker nailed this approach in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning book titled, *The Denial of Death*.(3) We live in a society frantically focused on youth, stoutly ignoring the end of things. “La-la-la, I’m not listening....!” Run, run, run, just as fast as you can. Dying is such a colossal threat that we run scared, we hide, we shut our eyes tight, we bury ourselves in work, in play – anything to ignore this impending doom. If I can’t see you, you can’t see me. That’s one approach. Maybe even works – for a while. Then there are those who choose the flip side. Not flight, but “fight.” Bring it on. Poet Dylan Thomas pleads with his dying father:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.(4)

We will struggle, we will fight, we will give no quarter. We may go down, but we’ll go down *fighting!* And yet . . . in some corner of our mind, we know that this is a fight we cannot “win.” Heroic struggle it may be, a final bellow into the dark: “I *am*, and I will not be defeated!” But the truth is, death *will* defeat all contenders, me included. End of story. And so others, knowing that fate all too well, simply fold their cards and give up the game. If death is the final exit, life has no meaning. In their bones, they feel Macbeth’s lament:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.(5)

They just give up in despair. Flight, fight, or collapse. One death, dozens of ways to handle it.

Let me suggest another possibility. Throughout the history of Christianity, some voices have offered the possibility of my dying as a self-conscious *act*, in which I return the gift of my life back to the Giver. My dying then *itself* becomes my final act of faith in God. Not giving up, not giving in, not fighting to the last gasp, but rather *returning the gift of my life*, with interest. In deep trust in God’s loving power. Like Jesus, we say, “into your hands I commend my spirit.”(Luke 23:46) We die into God. And . . . dying becomes the final *act* of living our faith in the God Whose love has supported us “all the day long.” What I’m talking about might be called our final *oblation*, to swipe a word from long ago – our final *offering* to God. Now, what might such a uncommon approach look like? How do I actually pull off such a radical thing? Let me suggest a few characteristics. First, we simply confess that, yes, our life *is* a gift from the hand of God. “I give thee back the life I owe,” as the hymn says.(6) A gift – a complicated mix of troubles and triumphs, of loves found and lost, of struggle and surprises. But, over and over in scripture and Christian testimony – a gift from the hand of our loving Creator, *not* a curse. From the first puff animating lifeless clay, to the final glad reunion, life is *given*, a gracious donation from the divine Lover to the beloved creature, intended to be enjoyed, rich and full. And shared. That’s a second notion. As we die, we realize that we are not alone, and never have been. We were thrown into this world already connected to others, and stumbling through our lives, we made, we broke, we repaired connections with hundreds of other lives. In fact, truth is, we are a patchwork quilt of all our relationships: our wounds, our laughter, our struggles, our hopes, our loves, and our losses. We are a relation of relations, all by ourselves. “She has her mother’s face. He has his father’s laugh.” We live in relationship – and we die in relationship. Horizontally, to those we knew, and those who influenced them. To those we know now. And to those whom we hope to influence in the future, our children,

and theirs. . . . And also vertically, to God, through Jesus Christ. “You are Mine,” says God. “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you,” says God. “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. . . .”(Isaiah 49:15-16) Our names, inscribed by the nails of a suffering Love that *will not let us go*. Even to death’s greedy claw. We belong to *God*. And so we return the gift of our life to the One Who loves us so. And we do so as a self-conscious act of Christian *stewardship*. What does that mean? We take stock of the resources we have. We do not convert everything into gold bullion – we convert it into *more life*. In God’s good love, what can I do with all that I have? How can I share the goodness? How can I give my life back – with interest? First of all, as we approach our final days, we can look to our relationships – we can thank those who have meant so much to us. Face to face, scribbling a note, on Facebook – you choose. Say the words you need to say. *Say them!* Thank you, thank you, for making my life richer. You have been the delight of my life, from the first time your tiny fingers curled around my pinkie finger. A yellowing card, gently cracked open thirty years later, can still sting the eyes with tears of shared gratitude. We can also mend fences. We don’t walk this earth long before we start stepping on toes, whether we mean to or not. But broken relationships can leave such a legacy of pain. We can do something to heal them before we step off this life’s stage. Whatever we can. Forgive without holding back. Restore as we can. Yes, it is hard sometimes, no question. But that’s part of offering our dying to God. Bringing a bit more healing to our weary world. Mending those broken fences. And then, of course, we can do some of the detail-work. Preparing our legal wishes, our financial affairs, to help family, friends, and even those we’ll never meet, on the other side of the world. In trust, I pass on the good gifts God has given me. I choose to be a responsible steward of all my stuff. For example, we take a look at this body we have worn for decades – how might we give it for the benefit of others? Sometimes organ donation is a possibility, sometimes the entire thing, balding head to hammer-toes, for research. Let somebody get some good out of our earthly remains. We can donate to others, as part of our final self-offering to Christ in faith. We can create a financial legacy, if we have the cash, to continue the blessing to others for decades to come. Maybe even set up a legacy fund for a congregation near you. And we can also speak our faith to others. Let even our final breath become a praise to the God Who gave us life. Even when we feel trapped in the hospital bed, tubes everywhere, we can still pray for others, as we have energy. In countless ways, we can offer our *dying* as a final act of stewardship, of everything we are. We offer ourselves to God, to our dying breath. Our ultimate oblation.

So, yes, we must die. But, no, we are *not* helpless. We can re-imagine our very dying as an act of faith in God. A graduation-day into God’s eternal joy. Paul showed us the way: imprisoned, yes, but *more free than his captors*. And we, too, can know the freedom of faith, to our dying breath. “Make me a blessing, God. Out of my life, may Jesus shine.”(7) Out of my *dying*, may Jesus shine. Make me a blessing. Amen.

Notes

(1) “Ailing Jimmy Carter ‘At Ease With Whatever Comes,’” by Richard Fausset and Alan Blinder, *New York Times*, Aug. 20, 2015; Accessed online on 8/20/15 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/us/jimmy-carter-cancer-health.html>

- (2) Though a splendid, informative, and hope-filled resource is Sallie Tisdale's *Advice for Future Corpses* (*And Those Who Love Them): A Practical Perspective on Death and Dying* (New York: Touchstone, 2018).
- (3) Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).
- (4) Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 8th ed., edited by Jerome Beaty, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 1060.
- (5) Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5.19-28.
- (6) George Matheson, "O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go," *Chalice Hymnal*, #540.
- (7) Ira B. Wilson, "Make Me a Blessing," *Lead Me, Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal*, #278.