

Midwives for the Dying(1)

Job 2:11-13

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

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I was just getting into the rhythm of my run, finding my stride, when the car pulled up beside me. “Get in,” said my wife Marilyn, an urgent edge to her voice. “You need to come home *now*.” My parents had just called. I was supposed to call them back. My mother had been fighting cancer for almost a year now. Any sudden call did not bode well. And sure enough, when I called back, I heard her voice, now turned gravelly by the cancer treatments, to say that the end was near. A few days, maybe. Come *now*. Oh, I had known it was coming, but I was stunned speechless anyway. Her voice traveled a thousand miles to whisper in my ear. Maybe for the last time. And I? I who make my living by speaking – could not put the words together. Could not. What do you say, when you don’t know what to say? When you need to somehow jam an entire lifetime in a single phrase. What do you say?

We have launched out this month on a series of sermons exploring death and our faith, our own dying and our faith, and today we continue, looking at the dying of *others*, and faith’s response. But how can you possibly hope to pack all of faith’s hope, and some earthly wisdom, into a single sermon? Well, you can’t. But maybe we can open a door for further discussion. Maybe we can start a conversation. As people of faith in Jesus Christ, what do we say to someone who is dying? What is helpful? What, on the other hand, is absolutely *not* helpful – even hurtful? Yes, even well-intentioned Christians can wound others. What to say, what *not* to say. What might be helpful to do. Or not to do. To give true assistance to one who is reaching the end of their life’s journey. Some of us here today know far better than I what has helped; others bear wounds that have lasted perhaps for years. And some of us just don’t know *what* to say. Sometimes we run away. Sometimes we have to stay, but we feel so hopelessly ill-equipped. Unprepared. What do you say, when you don’t know what to say?

Well, let’s begin with some “don’ts” before we get to the “do’s.” What are some words that hurt? What are some of those maybe well-intentioned clichés that just wound our souls? What have you heard that has done more harm than good? [time for any responses] One thing you find over and over is that the ending days are no time for any “you shoulds.” Only *somebody who operates under the illusion that they are in control* dares to say, “you should.” Over our living, maybe, we have some control – though rarely as much as we might think. But over someone’s dying? No “shoulds” can possibly apply. Those who are dying do what the dying will do. Yes, there may be some actions that the dying can take. But the time when anybody can force their hand by decree has passed. That train has left the station. And neither will we treat them as passive victims, as poor unfortunates, much less as sinners deserving their fate. Like it or not, the role of God has already been taken. We do not judge, we will not extrapolate their ultimate destination. In the name of Jesus Christ, we will bite back words meant to cut. For the love of God.

But then, what sorts of things can we actually do? We who love those who are dying, our friends, our family? We might become what Walter Schuman has called, “Midwives for the Dying.” Midwives ushering our beloved – or *somebody else’s beloved* – toward their holy new birth into

God's eternal joy. God will receive them, and do what God will do. But we can become holy midwives to turn their face toward God, Whose love is stronger than death. First, as followers of Jesus Christ, we will count any dying person as a beloved child of God's heart. God's little girl, little boy. Maybe frightened, maybe hopeful. We turn to them, that they may turn to the God Whose love will not let them go. That above all. In God's eyes, they *matter*. A reporter once asked Mother Teresa in Calcutta why she and her Missionaries of Charity sisters bothered ministering to the dying beggars of the streets. They will bring them in from the doorways and alleys, bathe them, put them between clean sheets, sing, converse, and pray with them. "There are so many of them," the reporter said. "It never ends. Why do you bother?" She replied, "So that those who live like dogs can die like angels."(2) As those present to our loved ones, our friends who are on the final stages of their life-journey, we treat them as blessed ones. They may be struggling with physical pain, with unfinished emotional business, with spiritual agonies, or just grumpy – but they are beloved because of God's love shown in Jesus Christ. We surround them with that love, given to *us* from beyond. Invading every room, over, under, around, and through every space, our attitude will fuel any *action* we may take. We treat every dying person as a dying *person*, a beloved child of God's heart, not just a collection of body parts wearing out.

And so we shall cherish them. And we shall *listen* to them. Because they are precious, we shall do what we can to make ourselves available to them. We shall *donate* ourselves to somebody else, as a ministry of the resource called "myself." How? If we are within the family circle, we can talk with them, if they wish. About whatever they wish. If we are friends, we can sit with them, even for long hours of just silence, and give the family some time to rest. For dying is an exhausting business for everyone. I remember sitting beside a man who was busy dying, chatting. He looked up at me and said, "You know, Bob, dying ain't easy." His wife's haggard look was silent confirmation. We can do what we can to give them some relief. We can't do everything, of course. And some of us are better at it than others, true. But donation of self is a mighty ministry. Giving our time to be *with* them. What we are doing right now, this very moment, could be called preparing a community of support. Some of us right here, right now, have sat with the dying. Others of us will do so one day. Some might not be able to, just not built that way. What can they do? Telephone. Email. Text. Send a card. Offer to drive family members, sit with a dog while they visit the hospital. Wash the dishes. Run errands, get groceries, send food care-packages, baby-sit the kids. There is a bundle of amazing talent packed into this very room. We have everything we need, right here, to *be* a community of support. Midwives for the dying.

Some have called such a community of volunteers, "burden-sharers."(3) But there are more burdens than the merely physical. Running errands does a world of good, gives the family the gift of time to recuperate. But there are other burdens to share. I mentioned listening a moment ago. Listening is another kind of burden-sharing, for sometimes deep regrets lie buried within the talk. Unvoiced fears. You don't have to be ordained to hear a holy confession. We can give the gift of a listening ear, and the heart of Christ's compassion. Sometimes we may hear some long-buried guilt. One man confessed, to a stranger – maybe that was easier than to his daughter – "I remember a new girl in my grade school. Oh, she was so cute. My heart just broke every time I sneaked a look at her. The next week, she was gone. Family just left, no explanation. I never saw her again. But I never forgot her. And I could never tell my wife, who I loved dearly until her end." And then he paused, took a shaky breath, and said, "will she forgive me, when we meet up there?" Gently, with compassion, without a scrap of judgment, we can listen. In the presence of God, we can listen, as a holy act. Sharing the burden of their inner struggles. We will often have no answer. None. But

we listen, bringing the presence of God into the room with us. We can bring such unresolved fears to God in prayer, bringing the confusion to God's heart, laying the burdens in God's arms. Where they belong, after all. We can share burdens.

And we will discover that, in sharing burdens, in donating our selves, we might be surprised to *receive* ministry from the very ones we came to help. Oh, yes! In the mystery of God's secret action, whenever we offer to share burdens, we will always receive more than we give. Some families sing with their dying beloved, and suddenly there is an invisible bond that forms, linking the living and the dying, and beyond. You can almost hear the beating of unseen wings, the hallelujah chorus of the choir gathered around the throne from the Book of Revelation. The walls of the room seem to grow tissue-thin, and eternity spills in. Sometimes, the dying show us the way. Doing something totally unexpected. Once a couple of elders delivered communion to a hospice room, family gathered 'round. Solemnly they filled the little plastic shot-glasses in the communion kit with grape juice, brought out the bread roll. Said the words, offered the bread and cup. The grandmother was too weak to lift the cup to her mouth, so one of the elders helped her, cradling her own hands around the grandmother's trembling one. Up to the mouth. Everybody knew it was the last time. And then, and then, the grandmother's hand stretched out, strong and true, took another cup from the kit, reached up – and *served the elder*. Oh, we think we come to give – and we are astonished when we *receive*. That, too, is a way we can help another person to die. By allowing them to serve us if they wish, receiving God's loving grace from *their* hand. Allowing *them* the dignity of being a human being, all the way. Sometimes we receive.

What might it look like for *us*, Community Christian Church in Tempe, Arizona, to become a “community of support” for the dying? Well, first we might want to learn a bit more about the common experiences of the dying. We might want to talk with those who minister to the dying, with hospice nurses, chaplains. We might invite conversations with lawyers about legal issues, living wills, DNR authorizations, and all that. We might ask around, who is good at bringing a covered dish to a family that is just exhausted, overstretched? Who is so good at being-with, just spending time quietly being with? Who prays well? How might we become a community of “midwives for the dying?” I heard of a man who sat by his dying wife's bed. Oh, he wasn't alone. Church folks stepped in, gave him time to rest. Surrounded him with care. At the end, after she had breathed her last, he said, “and I took her hand, and put it in the hand of God.” Nobody does that alone, you know. He was surrounded by a circle of holy midwives. Maybe . . . maybe like us. Amen.(4)

Notes

(1) The title, and metaphorical orientation of the entire sermon, is swiped from Walter H. Schuman's splendid article, “Midwives for the Dying: The Role of the Church in Death Care,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 21/3 (June 1994): 213-217.

(2) Recounted in a sermon I heard years ago, by The Rev. Dr. Rhodes Thompson, Jr.

(3) The phrase, and story elsewhere in this paragraph, from Schuman, “Midwives,” 216.

(4) A few other useful resources are Kathy Kalina, *Midwife for Souls: Spiritual Care for the Dying* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2007); Lani Leary, *No One Has to Die Alone: Preparing for a Meaningful Death* (New York: Atria, 2012); “The Art of Dying Well,” <https://www.artofdyingwell.org/>; “Providing Care and Comfort at the End of Life,” <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/providing-comfort-end-life>.