

Service of Remembrance

“Dancing with Death”

Philippians 1:21-26

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November 1, 2020

This past February, the popular radio host Rush Limbaugh shocked his listeners with the news that he had been diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. Then last month, he gave them an update on his condition and it was anything BUT positive. He said that recent scans showed “some progression of cancer,” which he said is “not dramatic” but still a step in the wrong direction. He said he can no longer deny that he’s “under a death sentence” and that coming to terms with a terminal illness has altered his mindset considerably. “We all know that we’re going to die at some point,” he observed, “but when you have a terminal disease diagnosis that has a time frame to it, then that puts a different psychological and even physical awareness to it.” Limbaugh has become more aware of how precious time is, that with an expiration date now stamped upon his life, he has become much more grateful for each new day and no longer takes any of it for granted. He said to his listeners: “Someone told me—I think this is good advice and may be helpful—the only thing that any of us are certain of is right now, today. That’s why I thank God every morning when I wake up. I thank God that I did and try to make it the best day I can no matter what. I don’t look too far ahead and I certainly don’t look too far back.”

What has been a particular source of strength to him has been his own faith in God: “It is of immense value, strength, confidence, and that’s why I’m able to remain fully committed to the idea that what is supposed to happen will happen when it’s meant to. There’s some comfort in knowing that some things are not in our hands. There’s a lot of fear associated with that, too, but there is some comfort. It’s helpful...God is it helpful. It’s helpful to be able to trust and to believe in a higher plan.”

It was Dr. Samuel Johnson who long ago made the famous observation that “the threat of death wonderfully concentrates the mind.” When life seems open-ended, that is, without a known ending point, we tend to take so many things for granted. In the process, we squander much of our time, our thoughts, and even meaningful relationships because in the back of our minds, we think there’s always enough time left to make up for all the things we’ve wasted or never took seriously enough. But then one day you wake up with a death sentence and everything suddenly assumes a fresh perspective, a whole new importance which you may never have gained otherwise.

The famed Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky has always been one of my favorite novelists. In fact, I spent a good portion of last summer finally reading all 800 pages of his *The Brothers Karamazov*- a book which had been on my bucket list for some years now. Next month will be the 171st anniversary of an experience that dramatically shook his life, changing it forever. On December 22, 1849, the 27 year-old writer was arrested by the Russian police and taken to a maximum-security prison for being a political revolutionary. Actually, he was not against the Russian government as he was against the cruelties of serfdom in which poor peasants suffered enforced servitude to large manorial estates. The conditions of his imprisonment were difficult and for eight months, he slept on hard straw beds in small, damp rooms without much light. During most of that time, he occupied himself by reading books of a

spiritual nature, particularly the Bible. On December 22, he and the rest of his group were removed from their cells and taken to a square and lined up on a gallows where they were sentenced to be shot. Each was given a cross to kiss, the chance to confess to a priest, and then dressed in peasant shirts and hoods for the execution. The first three men in line were tied to stakes while the soldiers readied themselves to fire. Soon Dostoevsky heard a drum roll and realized that he--the sixth in line--along with his fellow prisoners, were to be saved. The tsar's messenger came riding into the square and read the pardon. He and his group were taken back to the prison and prepared for the long journey to a hard labor camp in Siberia.

This event was to have a lasting effect on his life and influenced his writing for years to come. It not only reaffirmed and strengthened his religious belief but his close scrape with death gave Dostoevsky a NEW APPRECIATION for life. He realized that in spite of their condition, people can overcome oppressive circumstances and even be JOYFUL through them. As a result, his philosophy became one of unconditional love and forgiveness- two moral values which struck him in the moments before his "execution." For him, these morals were the "...supreme human consolation" with unconditional love as the ONLY hope for the future of the world. Thus, Dostoevsky's views changed from one of social revolution to a more SPIRITUAL level as he realized that though he could never change the past, he COULD alter the future. His stay of execution convinced him to spend the rest of his life telling others that human beings had the power to "...turn each moment into an eternity of happiness" WHATEVER the circumstances. With this newfound attitude towards life, Dostoevsky was prepared to face his sentence of hard labor and Siberian exile with a new spiritual strength and a positive vision of the future.

I have a friend—a former minister in my last Presbytery—who had a very SIMILAR experience. He has often shared with me what has become THE DEFINING EVENT in HIS life- what he calls "dancing with death." Several years ago, this pastor--now in his late 70's—twice came close to dying- once after having developed prostate cancer; and the other after a ten-foot fall from a ladder that left him in an intensive care unit for a month with a serious brain injury. Knowing the grim reaper lay just around the corner profoundly affected him and has allowed him to see things about himself and life he might not have known otherwise. It helped him to understand how he was not immortal but FINITE and that our lives on this world are actually quite limited. Hence, it led him to adopt as his credo a line from Mohandas Gandhi, "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever."

But through it, he ALSO discovered that dancing with death liberates you, that as one of his great inspirations—Steve Jobs—once said in the middle of his OWN battle with life, "Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart." This realization has created a greater urgency for my friend to live life to the fullest and to try to leave as positive a mark on the world and on those he loves as he can.

Henri Nouwen, a much-beloved Catholic priest and spiritual director whose writings have been nearly as influential as those of C.S. Lewis, had his OWN "dance with death" which he thoughtfully detailed in an article he entitled "A Glimpse Behind the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life." One icy winter morning, he was crossing the street when he was struck by the outside rearview mirror of a passing van which almost killed him. The ambulance arrived and took him to the emergency room of the local hospital where they determined his condition was extremely critical. After being transferred to the Intensive Care Unit, the truth began to sink in

that he was in danger of actually dying. It was then that he realized that being struck by the mirror of that passing van was forcing him to look at himself in a radically new way. Except for brief, insignificant illnesses, he had never been in a hospital bed. Now he found himself rendered totally passive by the experience, dependent upon the people around him and discovering he could do nothing without their help. Yet, through it all, he maintained an unexpected sense of well-being without any real sense of heightened anxiety.

Entering what he described as a zone or “portal” of death, he said he felt something he had never experienced before- pure and unconditional love. More specifically, it was an intensely personal and non-judging presence that pushed aside all his fears and simply asked that he trust it completely. He hesitated at first to say it was Jesus although he had spent his life teaching on and developing a close relationship with him. But as this presence took greater hold of him, he had no doubt who it was; all ambiguity and uncertainty were gone. As he expressed it:

He was there, the Lord of my life, saying, “Come, don’t be afraid. I love you.” His presence was deeply human as well as deeply divine, very personal but so much greater than my imaginings. I knew without doubt that he was there for me, but also that he was embracing the universe. I knew he was the Jesus I had prayed to and spoken about, but also that now he did not ask for prayers or words. All was well.”

Afterwards, death seemed to have lost all its power. He felt as if he was walking through a sea whose waves had been rolled away and he was being safely held as he moved toward the other shore. All jealousy, resentment, and anger were being gently removed and he was being shown that “love” and “life” were greater, deeper, and stronger than any of the forces he had been worrying about.

There were a set of conflicting emotions going on at the same time. On the one hand, it was as if Jesus was opening up his home to him and inviting him in, saying, “Here is where you belong.” It was a kind of return to the womb of God, the same God who had created him and fashioned him in his MOTHER’S womb. Yet, he also experienced a resistance to coming home. What was preventing him was the conviction that he was still bound to his own old world by unresolved conflicts with people he knew. It was the pain of forgiveness that withheld him from his true destiny, that ANGER and not love was the thing that kept him clinging to life. Love and love alone would be the ONLY thing that would free him to die.

As he felt life weakening in him, he suddenly sensed a deep desire to forgive and be forgiven, to let go of all evaluations and opinions, to be free from the burden of judgments. He said to a dear friend, “Please tell everyone who has hurt me that I forgive them from my heart, and please ask everyone whom I have hurt to forgive me too...In case I die, tell everyone that I feel an immense love for all the people I have come to know, also toward those with whom I am in conflict. Tell them not to feel anxious or guilty, but to let me go into the house of my Father and to trust that there my communion with them will grow deeper and strong. Tell them to celebrate with me and be grateful for all that God has given me.” With that, he had given himself totally over to Jesus, feeling like a little chick safe under the wings of its mother.

In the days that followed his surgery, he began to discover what it meant that he had NOT died and would soon recover. On the one hand, he was glad to be alive but on a DEEPER level, he was confused and wondered why Jesus had not called him home. His main question was:

“Why am I alive? Why has God asked me to return to a place where love is so ambiguous, peace so hard to experience, and joy so deeply hidden in sorrow?” Two lessons from his near-death experience ESPECIALLY stood out for him: PROCLAIMING GOD’S LOVE, and DYING FOR OTHERS. FIRST, it seemed to him that in light of HIS “dance with death,” he had received a DEEPER and more INTIMATE knowledge of not belonging to the world. He was more convinced than ever that he was a child of God, a brother of Jesus, and that he was preserved in the intimacy of divine love. Once he had fully accepted that truth, he could then go into the world to speak and act as Jesus did. He saw that his great spiritual task was to trust SO FULLY that he belonged to God that he could LIVE MORE FREELY in this world as Steve Jobs HIMSELF had discovered in his OWN encounter with mortality. Nouwen now felt he could be free to speak even when his words were not received; free to act even when his actions were criticized, ridiculed, or considered useless; free also to receive love from people and to be grateful for all the signs of God’s presence in the world. He was convinced that he was able to TRULY love in the world when he fully believed that he was loved by One far beyond its boundaries.

His SECOND great realization was a deepened sense that he had been called to die for others. This is one of the ways to witness to God’s love with more than words. The critical difference has to do with HOW one dies, that if we die with much anger and bitterness, then we will leave our family and friends behind in confusion, guilt, and shame. Nouwen understood that if he could truly say he was grateful for what he had lived--eager to forgive and be forgiven, full of hope so that those who love him would continue their lives in joy and peace--he could, in the hour of his death, create more true spiritual freedom than he had been able to create during all the years of his life. His near-death experience had in fact become A GIFT FROM GOD to help him realize with new intensity that “dying is the MORE IMPORTANT act of living.” All of us are thus faced with two options in the hour of our death- either we can bind ourselves and others with guilt, or set ourselves and others free with gratitude. This is a choice between a death that gives life and a death that kills.

Along with awaking from his surgery and realizing that he was still in the world, he had an immediate sense of being sent- sent to make this all-embracing love of God known to people who hunger and thirst for love but who often look for it where it cannot be found. He now saw life as a long journey of preparation, of preparing oneself to truly die for others; it is a series of little deaths in which we are asked to move increasingly from CLINGING TO OTHERS to LIVING FOR THEM. It is learning to understand that Jesus calls us to let go of everything and to trust him fully, and if we DO, then death will never be something for us to fear, that both living and dying find their TRUE meaning in the glory of the risen Christ who remains the Lord of the living AND the dead. Where he HAD understood this from an INTELLECTUAL perspective, he now knew it PERSONALLY and that this urgency he now felt to share these lessons with others could be the greatest gift he could give them.

But there’s still one OTHER testimonial we need to hear from this morning- indeed, the MOST IMPORTANT ONE OF ALL. Our New Testament lesson was from St. Paul’s Epistle to the church at Philippi written while the great Apostle was confined to a Roman prison. He is aware that his days on earth are numbered and that martyrdom will probably be his calling. In the years since his conversion on the Damascus road, he had suffered numerous beatings and stonings, imprisonments and even shipwrecks in his defense of Christ and his Gospel. Yet, through it all, he had no fear of death, convinced that whether he lived OR died, it made no

difference. You see, for him to LIVE meant living with Christ in this world and continuing the work Jesus had called him to, where DYING meant living in his personal presence. This is why he could say somewhere else that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. He also understood that since his encounter with Jesus many years before, his life was no longer his own, that he belonged utterly to Christ and him alone. And he ALSO understood that if WE maintained that same truth in our OWN heart and mind, then we TOO would be free to live out that truth and demonstrate that reality with love and faith and courage REGARDLESS of our circumstances.

My friends, this morning's service is not just for those who have recently lost a loved one and find themselves still living with the sting of that loss. It's for ALL of us because the inevitability of "dancing with death" hangs over each of our OWN lives- a threat that will often come quickly and quite unexpectedly. The danger is that our natural inclination is to think that our lives are more safe and secure than they actually are, that tragedy and sickness and even death may perhaps await the OTHER guy, but we're magically insulated from such adverse effects or so we like to BELIEVE. We convince ourselves that it's the OTHER PERSON who's going to catch the coronavirus- NOT US, and so we can take unnecessary risks because we're immune against it, that is, until we contract it OURSELVES and then that thin veil of invulnerability we've donned quickly falls away from us.

However, if my pastor friend and Dostoevsky, if Henri Nouwen and St. Paul are to be believed, then such near-death encounters can INDEED become A GIFT FROM GOD, teaching us lessons about ourselves we would never have learned OTHERWISE. Experiencing a threat to our mortality can lead some of us to make the most profound discoveries about ourselves. The trauma it creates reminds us how all life is precious. Likewise, it can fill us with a heightened sense of urgency, reminding us how short life really is and yet how necessary it is to get our priorities in order; to sort out the TRULY important things like human relationships and our relationship with God from those things that aren't. As Brennan Manning, the popular Catholic speaker, writer and best-selling author of *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, states, "It is only the reality of death that is powerful enough to quicken people out of the sluggishness of everyday life and into an active search for what life is REALLY about." . . .

For the Apostle Paul, his courage in the face of death grew out of the assurance that Jesus Christ was an ever-present reality who had promised--whether in life OR in death--that NOTHING would ever separate us from either his presence or his love. It was a promise that engendered within him--as it does within US--a whole NEW sense of FREEDOM- a freedom FROM fear and depression, a freedom FROM loneliness and a loss of hope, but ALSO a freedom TO love and to trust, a freedom that enables us TO rejoice in WHATEVER the circumstances. Thus like Paul, we TOO can affirm--even as HE did--how "Death has been swallowed up in victory" and to exclaim as he did, "O death, where is thy VICTORY? O grave, where is thy STING?" Let us now begin preparing for our special "service of remembrance..."