

“Freed from the Fear of Death”

John 11:17-27

Romans 6:8-9

2 Corinthians 1:9

Hebrews 2:14-15

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July 28, 2019

As some of you know, I was raised in Glendora, a small town in the San Gabriel valley. There I attended the United Methodist Church from the time I was in pre-school until I left for college. I had a very good experience growing up in that little church. It profoundly shaped the person I became. I know others who say the same thing. That is testimony to the fact that a little church can make a huge difference in the lives of its members. I made many good friends at that church and I am still in close contact with a number of them.

When I was fifteen, two boys in our church were killed in a car accident. They were also fifteen years old. Their names were Van and John. Those of us who were in the Methodist Youth Fellowship with them served as the pall bearers at their funeral. I helped carry the casket of my friend Van to the grave. I had known Van much longer than I had known John. Van and I had been in Sunday School together at the Methodist church while in elementary school. We had been on the track team together in junior high school. I admired Van and looked up to him. He seemed fearless and confident in ways I wasn't. Van's parents are still active members of the Methodist church in Glendora. Even though it was forty-seven years ago, every August on the anniversary of Van's death I send a note to his parents to let them know that I haven't forgotten their son. They are deeply appreciative of this.

To this day I grieve their deaths. I recall the events surrounding their deaths as if they occurred last week: I remember the phone call from another member of the youth group informing me of the unbelievable news; I remember trying not to cry at the funeral since I didn't want to appear weak; I

remember how I finally broke down at the graveside when I saw Van's mother blow him a parting kiss goodbye. And I remember these events as if they were recent because their deaths were a trauma, not only for me but also for the others in the church, especially for those of us in the youth group.

Teenagers aren't accustomed to thinking about death. Moreover, at that age, we imagine that death is so far removed from us that it will never really touch us. So, when two of our friends were suddenly snatched away from us just as we were about to enter high school together, our world was deeply shaken. We were forced to confront mortality in a way we otherwise wouldn't have had to deal with it.

As a result, our youth group became very serious about Christian faith. We had just gotten a new youth pastor from Fuller Seminary a few months before their deaths and he became the shepherd of our vulnerable souls for the next few years. He challenged us to make a decision for faith in the gospel. We were ready to listen and to respond to his challenge since the deaths of Van and John had shown us that life is not to be taken for granted. Their deaths forced us to confront head-on the question of the meaning of life. Their deaths thus became the occasion for us to make a serious commitment to God and Christ. From that point forward, we were in earnest about being Christians. We knew that life belongs to God who gives it and that our lives were to be dedicated to God. For those of us who lived through these events, it is difficult to imagine how our lives might have been different had our friends not died. But they did, and this event played a formative role in my life and my faith.

For many people in our society, death is an unpleasant topic that is best not spoken about. Behind this reticence to mention or think about death is fear. Fear of death is an unconscious motivator of many people. And with the loss of traditional religious faith on the part of many people today, death is something people don't know how to wrap their minds around. I've noticed this time and again in conversations with others. I've had people tell me that they try never to think about their own death because they only want to think happy thoughts. But this is a form of denial. For the truth is that we're all going to die. And if we refuse to face up to this fact that each of us will someday die, we miss that

which gives depth to our experience of life and, instead, we live superficial lives. That's what Elizabeth Kubler Ross meant when she said, "It is the denial of death that is partially responsible for people living empty purposeless lives." I agree with her. It is not by fleeing from the awareness of our mortality but only by acknowledging and embracing it that we can find the real depth and richness of life. I don't think a day goes by that I am not aware of my own mortality. This doesn't mean I dwell on death in a morbid sense; but every morning when I wake up, I realize that being alive is a precious gift. As I get older, I also realize that I have more time behind me and less time ahead of me before I die. This forces me to choose my priorities very carefully so as not to waste the time remaining to me.

We have to speak about death in the church. Indeed, the church is one of the few places in our society where death and the fear of death can be discussed forthrightly. And that is because of the nature of Christian faith. Death is a very prominent theme in the New Testament. The cross on which Jesus died is the central symbol of our faith. Moreover, a central aspect of the gospel message is that death is not to be feared. The gospel bids us to look death in the face because faith in God gives us the courage and serenity to live without fear of death. Think about that for a moment: the ability to live without fear of death! How many people can even envision the possibility of life apart from the fear of death? That is one thing the gospel has to offer people in our society who are trying to deny death because they are afraid of it. The passage from the Letter to the Hebrews testifies to the early Christian experience that faith in Christ liberated persons "who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb. 2:15). What a remarkable passage from the Bible this is. It correctly describes the paralysis that fear of death can lead to. Such fear is a form of slavery. And some people are so enslaved by their fear of death they can't imagine any realistic alternative (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13).

One thing about the early Christians that attracted the attention of the Romans who persecuted them was their fearlessness in the face of death. The Romans were struck, amazed, and perplexed by the Christians because they weren't afraid to die. When the Romans threatened the Christians with

death unless they worshiped the Roman gods, the Christians gladly accepted death over betrayal of their faith. This courage in the face of death made a powerful impression on the Romans and actually contributed to the spread of Christianity in the Roman empire. The Romans were curious about what the Christians believed that enabled them to live without such fear of death. It alerted the Romans to the possibility of another understanding of death than that which they held—or, more accurately, than that which held them in bondage. What if death is not the annihilation of our lives, but the beginning of a new life on the other side of death? Although Jesus died on the cross, we proclaim that God raised him from the dead. Moreover, we believe that we too shall be raised from the dead by God.

I once heard a remarkable sermon at a church in Chicago that I'll never forget. The minister said that it is the job of the church not only to teach people how to live; it is also the church's job to teach people how to die. I was struck by what he said and his comment has stayed with me to this day. I completely agree with him. Part and parcel of our belief as Christians is that we must fully accept our own deaths in order to live courageously and boldly. That's why the apostle Paul interprets the act of baptism as a participation in the death of Jesus. He writes: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3). Hence, the initiatory rite by which we become members of the church is through a symbolic participation in the death of Jesus. We are asked to die with Jesus, so that we can also be raised from the dead with him. Paul goes on to say: "If we have died with Christ, we know that we will also live with him" (Rom. 6:8).

None of us really wants to die, unless there are exceptionable circumstances such as an incurable illness that brings much pain and suffering. Also, some persons choose suicide on account of deep emotional pain and despair. But even the people in these horrible circumstances would prefer to live and be healthy and happy. I think we all want life as well as that abundant life of which Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John (10:10). And, for that reason, the prospect of death hovers before us like a threat to that which we most want and desire. The threat to our lives that death poses can even be

experienced as a punishment, as though we had a death sentence hanging over our heads; this is especially the case with those persons who anticipate death with a guilty conscience. That's why the New Testament links death so closely with sin; death is a threat to those who have not acknowledged their sins and received forgiveness because they fear God's judgment. That's what Paul means when he says, "The sting of death is sin" (1 Cor. 15:56). But here too, the gospel offers us freedom from the fear of death only in conjunction with the offer of God's forgiveness. While I have great remorse for the sins I've committed in my life, as a Christian I am assured of God's forgiveness. While I believe that I will have to give account of my life to God, I do not live in terror of God's judgment. Hence, the fear of death and the fear of judgment that often accompanies it can become an opportunity to repent and to trust that God not only raises the dead but forgives us as well. As Paul says, "we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). If we trust in God's goodness and God's mercy, we need not live in that bondage to fear that death occasions in so many people. Through faith, we can be freed of the fear of death and judgment because God loves us and wants our ultimate fulfillment.

The story of Lazarus and his sisters is a poignant one. Jesus has lost his friend and he is very sorrowful. John's Gospel reports that "Jesus began to weep" (11:35). Even Jesus was sad about death. He was also deeply touched by the grief of the sisters and the other mourners: "he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (11: 33). One of the most interesting jobs I've ever had was working as a funeral assistant at a mortuary. Often, when I'd be assisting at a funeral, I would get misty-eyed just observing the grief of other people, even though I did not know the person who had died and who was being mourned. I had the same experience as a hospital chaplain. Although Christians are freed from the fear of death, this does not change the fact that death is sad. It is the ending of a life. To be sure, we Christians believe that death is not the absolute end, but rather a new beginning. Still, we cannot escape the sadness of the ending. People we love are gone and for the remainder of our earthly lives

we will miss them. And death is especially sad when it comes prematurely, before we have lived out the fulness of years. The death of Lazarus was premature, as was the death of my friends Van and John.

In the story from John's Gospel, Martha blames Jesus for not having arrived earlier since he could have prevented Lazarus from dying. But Jesus uses this as an occasion to ask Martha about her faith. She says, "I know that he [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11:24); but the clear implication of what she says is that she doesn't want to wait: she wants her brother back right now. I think we can all sympathize with her. I have seen similar reactions on the part of grieving people. While they may believe that their loved ones are in heaven, it is small comfort to those who now experience a gaping hole in their lives on account of the absence of the deceased. So, while faith allows us to live freed from the fear of death, it doesn't take away the sadness we inevitably feel when someone dies. Nonetheless, it makes a big difference whether one believes that death is the absolute end of life or whether one believes that, like Jesus, we too will be raised by God from the dead. That's why Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). Notice how he redefines the issue here: the resurrection isn't merely something far off in the distant future but is here now as a power that can transform our lives in the present through faith in Christ.

The good news of the gospel is that faith frees us from the fear of death, but we are not asked to deny its reality. It is not an illusion. Yet we Christians can face the reality of death without flinching because we trust in the God who creates life and raises the dead. The fact that we are able to face death honestly and discuss it openly instead of running away from it gives our lives a depth that many people in our society do not know. People who frantically try to deny death because they are in bondage to the fear of death can never experience the fulness of life in God's world because they always stay on the surface. But the reason they are afraid of death is because they don't know that this is God's world. That's what is expressed in the hymn we sang this morning, which was one of the first hymns I

ever learned at the Glendora Methodist Church: "This is My Father's World." And because this is God's world, nothing in the world can really harm us, not ultimately. As Paul says, "neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). God did not create us to destroy us. God created us for a fulfillment that transcends this earthly life. We have an eternal destiny that enables us to put this life and its fears into perspective. Knowing that this is God's world means that we need not be afraid. We can rest assured that if we are called upon to surrender our lives for the sake of what is right, we will be able to do so, just as the early Christians did when faced with death at the hands of the Romans. We can live courageously and joyfully, even when tragic things happen like the death of my two friends. I wish that Van and John had lived until ripe old age, but I do not believe that they are lost. I believe that they are alive with God and participating in "the communion of saints" mentioned in the Apostles Creed. God reigns supreme over both life and death. We are called to live without being slaves to the fear of death. This is an essential part of the gospel that we can share with our neighbors around us who are living in bondage to the fear of death. As those who have died with Christ, let us also live fearlessly in the hope that we will also be resurrected with him. For as Paul assures us, "The last enemy to be defeated is death" (1 Cor. 15:26).