

2006 Life Sunday Sermon #4

Text: Philippians 1:20-21

Theme: “In Life, In Death, Abide in Me”

Rev. Dr. Glenn E. Schaeffer, President, Lutherans for Life - Canada

On January 28, 2005, Marcel Tremblay of Kanata, Ontario, Canada, hosted what he called a “living wake” at a local hotel. He consumed two beers, two shrimp, and a crab cake. When Tremblay returned home, he sat in his recliner chair, placed a turkey basting bag over his head, and filled the bag with helium from a hose attached to a rented tank. He said the trapped gas would kill him painlessly within five minutes. Tremblay was pronounced dead at 11:51 p.m.

What would motivate Tremblay to commit suicide? He suffered from a chronic lung disease and in his own words, “To live the way I’m living is not living. It’s existing, and there’s no reason to continue it day in and day out for any longer than I’ve done.” (Reported by CanWest Global Communications, January 29, 2005.) A 20-year member of Dying with Dignity, Tremblay hoped his public suicide would show others with chronic and terminal illness that there is a way to “die with dignity.” Tremblay wanted media attention to emphasize that his act would be illegal if he needed assistance to carry it out. He hoped his death would be one step towards changing the laws in Canada concerning assisted suicide.

What a sad and pathetic way to end one’s life. There must be a better and more dignified manner in which we can deal with chronic and terminal illness. Is it really dignified to die by placing a turkey basting bag over your head and inhaling helium or by injecting yourself with a deadly poison or by slowly starving someone to death by withholding food and water?

Compare Tremblay’s perspective to that of Saint Paul’s.

It is commonly believed that Paul wrote the letter to the Philippian Christians when he was imprisoned in Rome (cf. Acts 28:14-31). Throughout this two-year imprisonment, Paul faced the daily reality that his life on earth might come to an end. Not a chronic or terminal illness for sure, but certainly suffering and death loomed ever on his horizon. Was Paul’s answer to his dilemma to gather his friends, share a meal, and then drink some poison thereby ending his life? No—such a thought never entered his mind.

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Tremblay used his chronic condition and final days on earth to encourage people to embrace death. Saint Paul used his situation and the days the Lord granted him to encourage people to embrace life—to embrace the One who calls Himself “the Resurrection and the Life.”

Paul wrote, “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly” (Philippians 1:12-14).

I’m sure Paul would have preferred to be a free man—free from the chains and the prison, but he also recognized that the Lord had taken a bad situation and made something good of it. Many of the temple guard were becoming believers in Christ as a result of Paul using his imprisonment to witness to Christ. As other believers observed Paul dealing with his situation in this way they grew bolder in living and sharing their faith in Jesus, with the result that more and more people were hearing the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ.

It would have been easy for Paul to echo Tremblay’s sentiments, “To live the way I am living is not living. It’s existing and there’s no reason to continue it day in and day out for any longer than I have already done.” Instead, Paul proclaimed, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain . . . I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is necessary for you that I remain in the body” (vs. 21, 23-24).

Mark Twain quipped, “Everyone wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die to get there.” How true! How often do we find ourselves saying, “I hope that when I die, I die quickly.” One of the fears of dying is that we might experience a long, painful death. There is a rabbinic adage that says it is impossible to look long into the sun or into death.

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Death is one of man's greatest nemeses and enemies. It is unnatural for man to die. God intended man to live forever. Death is God's punishment for our rebellion. "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful" (Hebrews 12:11a). And, not only is death painful for man, but it is painful for all of creation. Saint Paul wrote, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:22). God's creation is ever in a state of decline and decay, just as we are ever in a state of decline right from the moment we are conceived in sin in our mother's womb.

Our death-infected lives are filled with weeping, lamenting, mourning, and groaning. As our condition worsens we might even lament, "I would be better off dead." "I wish I were dead!" "I can't go on." "Let me die." "Help me die."

As we search the Scriptures we hear many of God's people lamenting their situation in life. Elijah cried out, "I have had enough, LORD! Take my life; I'm no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4b). Jeremiah wrote an entire book of the Bible that is given the name "Lamentations," because he weeps over the imminent destruction of Solomon's temple and a nation. Many of the Psalms are laments of God's people. Who of us, and especially those of us who are currently enduring a chronic or terminal illness, cannot identify with the words of David in Psalm 6? "O LORD, do not rebuke me in Your anger or discipline me in Your wrath. Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long? . . . I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes" (vs. 1-3, 6-7).

Is the Psalmist's lamenting a cry for death? Is it really a cry for a doctor to assist him in committing suicide? Rather, is it not a cry for life? Is it not a plea for help? Is it not a longing for relationship? Is it not a longing for deliverance? Is it not a cry for God to come closer? Dr.

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John Scott, MD, in an article entitled, “*Lamentation and Euthanasia*” writes, “At the heart of this lament is not a cry for death but a cry for life” (Human Medicine, Vol. 8, No. 2, April 1992, p. 116). Even as our Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died on Calvary he cried out, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” Was not our Savior’s lamenting a prayer for heavenly grace—for Fatherly mercy?

Dr. Harvey Chochinov, a psychiatrist at the University of Manitoba, and a leading expert on end-of-life issues gave this prognosis regarding Tremblay: “This man needed looking after. This man needed care. Tremblay was one of the growing number of Canadians who may not be battling a terminal illness but whose untreated symptoms leave them feeling hopeless, abandoned, and suicidal.” (Quoted in Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, Newsletter #52, March 2005.)

Tremblay didn’t need a turkey basting bag and helium. He needed to know of the God of love and grace who gives us reason to live even when we experience the worst of times. He needed someone to lead him to Calvary to behold the forsaken One and be told that God, for Jesus’ sake, has not forsaken him. He needed someone to lead him to the empty tomb so that he might hear the angels proclaim, “Jesus is not here. He has risen from the dead just as he said!”

One of the fears many people have as they face the reality of their death is that of dying a lonely death. But the God of grace and comfort assures us in His holy Word that we will not die alone. Jesus promises, “Behold, I am with you always.” In life and in death, the Lord abides with us! The Good Shepherd, who has already borne His cross and journeyed through death’s valley, travels with us as we “walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4), and therefore we need not fear the evil that will descend upon us with the immanence of our death.

The Bible affirms that God in His mercy hears our lament and comes to us in our time of need. The Lord answered Elijah’s prayer, not by sending a lightning bolt or Dr. Death, but by sending a ministering angel who prepared a meal for him (1 Kings 19:5-6). The Psalmist of

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Psalm 6 did not despair, but as he contemplates the previous faithful acts of God, he concluded, "Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace" (vs. 8-10). Paul, being a man of faith who kept his eyes on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of his faith, shared this confidence, even as death's evil grip took hold of him, "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death" (v. 20). Paul placed himself into the hands of Him who conquered death and his faith was not misplaced.

With God-given confidence we pray to our heavenly Father, especially as we come to our final days and hours, "I need Thy presence ev'ry passing hour" (LW 490:2). And the Lord comes to us. The Lord comes to us as the nurse and the doctor provide care for us. The Lord comes to us in the touch and the hug of a grandchild or friend. The Lord comes to us in the person of a pastor who leads us in confession and then announces, "By the power invested in me by Christ, I announce your sins are forgiven." The Lord comes to us as the pastor shares with us the heavenly feast in which our Lord feeds us with His Body and Blood assuring us that our sins (all of them!) are forgiven. The Lord comes to us in the layperson who shares God's Word of promise with us, such as, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:1-3). The Lord comes to us as He resurrects, from the depths of our memory, words spoken many years ago at our baptism, "Receive the sign of the holy cross both upon your forehead and upon your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. . . . Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given you the new birth of the water and of the Spirit

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and has forgiven you all your sins, strengthen you with His grace to life everlasting. Peace be with you. Amen" (LW p. 203). And as the Lord abides with us through Word and Sacrament, as He holds before our eyes Christ's cross and the empty tomb, He gives us reason to confidently sing, "I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless, Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness. Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory? I triumph still if thou abide with me!" (LW 490:4)

Now, this is dying with dignity!

Let us pray:

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;

Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;

Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

(LW 490:5)