

TUMC Sermon – Eternity Sunday November 26, 2017

Michele Rae Rizoli

Psalm 90
Luke 7:11-15

Preamble

A facebook friend posted an event from his church called, “Death Café” with the following explanation: “Bringing people together in a safe relaxed setting for discussions about all aspects of death, dying and living with a conscious awareness of death.”

This is not currently on the agenda at TUMC, but we do have the practice here of having an “Eternity Sunday,” where, to put it simply, we remember death and how it has visited us. Though you may find it difficult or morbid, this kind of practice is actually very healthy – especially the part about living with a conscious awareness of death.

About 35 years ago I used to work in Brazil for a doctor (John Cook Lane) who defied the cultural norms which dictated that one should never tell a patient or a family member that they were dying. You just didn’t talk about death. (To be fair Dr. Lane also introduced Cardio-pulmonary resuscitation to that country back in the 60’s, so he wanted to make sure that death only came when it was time. He defended in medical circles that it was absolutely necessary to let someone know they were going to die so that they could put both their material and spiritual affairs in order.

It’s good to remember every so often that life is a fatal disease, as they say. We’re all gonna to die.

I’ve been thinking about how to prepare for times of death in our congregation, and I know from experience already that the time of death is a very awkward time to talk about funeral plans. There’s so much else going on that it just isn’t the right time. So I have followed the example of other churches and prepared a simple form. It outlines some of the practical logistical aspects related to end of life and funeral choices that will make sure your wishes are on record when the time comes for you to walk this path. Filling it out is entirely voluntary. If you’re interested in having this conversation with yourself or with your loved ones, or thinking about what is important to you outside of the pressures and stresses of illness, fill out a form and give it back to me, or talk to me. There is no timeframe.

Wisdom in the house of mourning

Ecclesiastes 7:4 contains the following phrase: “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.” (But the heart of fools is in the house of mirth).

Today, as we will remember those loved ones we have lost. Let us be wise and enter the house of mourning and sit for a while and see what we can find in such a dark place. Rather than rushing to turn on the light sitting in the darkness can be a spiritually fruitful thing to do.

Poet T.S. Eliot says: I said to my soul, be still and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God.¹

This past week I have been in the house of mourning, as I've been remembering my father, Kenneth Schwartzentruber, who passed away a year ago on November 17th. He was a godly man, who lived a long life of faith and hard work, and whose time to leave a frail body finally arrived. His death came with some degree of relief. Yet it was, and still is, very difficult to think about that time, and as soon as I do, grief over his loss comes flooding back in. This is not just my experience. Along with thoughts about being the next generation to go and all that this implies about my own mortality.

In my father's passing and in the grief of remembering, I realized yet again that dying and mourning are sacred times. If you have ever been present as someone is dying, you know that it is a time when we are taken into the presence of the unknown, into the spiritual realm of life, the presence of God. It is a thin place, as they say in Celtic spirituality, where the realm of Heaven and the realm of Earth come close together.

People who work in the field of palliative care – care for the dying (medical staff, chaplain's, death doulas, death whisperers), remind us that there is an incredible amount of spiritual work that happens at the time of death for the person who is dying. At death people relive some of their life stories, they try to recast them in order to create meaning, to remind themselves of experiences of loving and being loved, and to seek forgiveness of wrongs they have done. Dying people consistently have visions of loved ones coming to get them and dreams of going on trips.² God is present to people of faith in very particular ways at that time. When my mother was dying she told my Dad that she had seen Jesus. At the time, I dismissed it as having a stroke. I'm not so quick to dismiss it now, I think she did. This was a comfort to her.

The grief that follows death – hard as it is – is also a sacred spiritual place. It is where we sort out our relationships with the person we've lost, with those who are still living; where we face many emotions, fond memories or deep regrets and hurts. It is a sacred place.

No wonder the writer of Ecclesiastes called mourning a place of wisdom. When dying and grief show up – or even serious illness – we are invited to look into the big

¹ Quoted in *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions*, Sue Monk Kidd, p.145

² I see Dead People, TedxBuffalo by Dr. Christopher Kerr

questions about our own brief time here in these bodies, to consider the impact of our lives on those around us, and to contemplate our own mortality.

I think the writer of this psalm we just heard had likely just experienced the loss of a loved one. “Our existence in an unimaginably huge universe is not something we [often] really think about on purpose. It is just too overwhelming. It’s not until we run up against a big loss that we stop and [have the opportunity] to ask the big ‘why’ questions.”³

This big questioning is one of the invitations we receive at a time of death and in mourning. So it is crucial that we not rush through it, that we inhabit that dark incubating space of grief.

The psalm tries to hold on to two different realities: the enormity of the creative force of the universe, the Divine (God), in whom we have our being, our dwelling place, and, compared to that, the human experience which only lasts a short season and is gone, like grass, or a long shift at work.

Our relative insignificance might make it feel to the poet of the psalm like God is out to get us, to snuff out our puny humanity. These emotions are stated in terms of anger and sin. I don’t think that’s necessarily who God is, or how things are, it is how the writer feels that they are in their grief. But then the psalm gets to a central realization in v. 12 “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” In other words, “Please God, don’t let us waste this precious time!”

In our recent newsletter, *The Place of Meeting*, our brother Vern Riediger wrote a very candid letter in which he shared with us how his diagnosis of cancer has shifted his life priorities. His illness has been an invitation for him to reassess how he has spent his life and how he wants to move forward.

That is the experience of many people who are diagnosed with a terminal illness. Their focus changes from things that are small to things that matter in terms of relationships, values, and life goals. Once it seems like one’s days are counted, the wise question is to return to the most basic question: “How do I want to spend my short and precious life?”

I don’t know why we wait for that brush with death before we think about this.

I’ve shared here before how a few years back, when my then boss died unexpectedly from an aggressive cancer. All the projects at work that kept us stressed and overworking for years suddenly didn’t matter at all! At his funeral not one of our project spreadsheets we had stressed over was mentioned, only what kind of person

³ *Help for the Hard times: Getting through loss*, by Earl Hipp, pg. 96

he was. “The things we worry about the moment before loss become completely irrelevant the moment after the loss.”⁴

So another gift in the house of mourning is that we realize that our time here is brief and that we must live according to our priorities and our calling. Don’t all stop working at once, but maybe hold it all a bit more lightly.

Philosopher Stephen Cave, in a TED⁵ talk has the following suggestion regarding our impending death:

“I find it is helpful to think of life as a book. Just as a book is bounded by its covers, by beginning and end, so our lives are bounded by birth and death... And even though a book is limited by beginning and end, the characters within it know no horizons. They only know the moments that make up their stories. So the characters of the book are not afraid of reaching the end of the book or whether it’s a comic strip or an epic. The only thing that matters is that you make it a good story.”

Mourning is a dark place, but it brings the opportunity to ask the big questions, to realize our time is limited, to reorient our lives to turn to God.

As people of faith, who know our dwelling place to be an eternal God, the psalmist in Psalm 90 also reminds us that loss is a time to remember God’s steadfast love. The reference to remembering it in the morning – that is the first part of the day – is probably to pray, “Dear God, remind us of your love sooner rather than later, so that we can live our lives more fully. “

The house of mourning is also where we encounter God’s love.

Let me tell you why I chose for us to read the story of the widow in Nain. I just love this story, it gets me every time; the surprise element for that group of mourners, and for the wailing mother.

Sure I stumble a bit on the question that Jarrett asked during Children’s time last week: “Did this *really* happen?” Today, in this context, that is a question I leave for the scholars who spend countless volumes on historicity, many words creating parallels with Elijah and Elisha who also resurrected a widow’s child, conjectures about Jesus’ true identity as a prophet, the role of resurrection in the Christian hope, the place of this passage in the overall Lucan narrative, etc., etc. All important, but not today.

I love this story because it is so true. It is true because it reflects the experience of loss at death and Jesus’ enormous compassion for a grieving person. Isn’t a return to

⁴ *Help for the Hard Times*, Earl Hipp. Pg. 95

⁵ Four things we tell ourselves about death.

https://www.ted.com/talks/stephen_cave_the_4_stories_we_tell_ourselves_about_death#t-907801

life the fantasy of anyone grieving someone they have lost? Here Jesus' heart went out to this mother, he felt her pain in his gut, he had compassion, he looked at her and wanted to ease her suffering. On the loss of my own newborn child many years ago the most comforting words spoken to me were: "God is crying with you." This story in the gospel speaks to us about the heart of God who is with us in the house of mourning.

I leave you with the words of Henry Nouwen:

Preparing ourselves for death is the most important task of life, at least when we believe that death is not the total dissolution of our identity but the way to its fullest revelation...How then do we prepare ourselves for death? By living each day in the full awareness of being children of God, whose love is stronger than death. Speculations and concerns about the final days of our life are useless, but making each day into a celebration of our beloved-ness as sons and daughters of God will allow us to live our final days, whether short or long, as birthing days. The pains of dying are labor pains. Through them, we leave the womb of this world and are born to the fullness of children of God.⁶

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.

⁶ Here and Now, Henry Nouwen, p. 140