

2013 Life Sunday Sermon
Text: Philippians 1:21
Theme: Living With Dying
Evan S. McClanahan, STS

In 2009, the PBS show *Frontline* featured an American math professor, Craig Ewart, who was diagnosed with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's Disease. The documentary film, called *The Suicide Tourist*, followed Mr. Ewart for about six months as he dealt with his diagnosis and subsequent decision to commit suicide with the assistance of a firm in Sweden called Dignitas. His wife agreed with his assessment of the situation and his decision to end his life. His daughter and son were also supportive, though more reluctantly at first. Mr. Ewart's rationale was that he knew his life would only get worse as his body and mind deteriorated, and there seemed to be little point in prolonging his suffering.

The film tracks the mindset and the philosophy of those who see assisted suicide as a moral option in the face of terminal illness. It is one thing to debate the issues in the abstract. It is another thing to see this philosophy lived out to its final conclusion. As the minutes of this hour-long film tick by, you wonder...will he go through with it? Will he change his mind at the last minute? Sure enough, Mr. Ewart proves true to his convictions and he follows through on his commitment to assisted suicide. He drinks the prescribed poison on his own power while the cameras roll. In a matter of moments, with his wife by his side, he dies. His earthly life ends and his eternal life continues.

For his choice to end his life, Mr. Ewart has become a courageous hero to many, a martyr for the cause of assisted suicide. He had the will, they would say, to carry out his highest ideal, to die on his own terms, to choose how and whether or not he would suffer the indignity of becoming helpless. In the eyes of others, he has become something of a

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villain, a symbol of all that is wrong with our culture of death. He didn't take courageous action, but the coward's way out.

Whether we should sanctify him or vilify him is perhaps not for us to say. Christians should certainly pity him and all who share his point of view. Because what is so desperately needed in the face of impending death is that Word from God that life is good, that life is desired, and that the God of life can be known and worshipped in all circumstances of life, even—and perhaps especially!—suffering.

Mr. and Mrs. Ewart were not Christian, and therefore were not guided by the same view of life and death that Christians are. But I would be willing to bet that some of their sentiments are shared by some of us. For example, Mr. Ewart's son, Ivan, remembered his dad saying, "On the one hand, I have death; on the other, suffering and death." From a human point-of-view, this statement is exactly correct. Mr. Ewart knew he was going to die, whether he ended his own life or whether he let ALS take its natural course. The question wasn't whether he was going to die. It was whether he would also suffer. Since none of us inherently like to suffer, and indeed go out of our way to avoid it, we can sympathize, even empathize, with Mr. Ewart's statement. And we can affirm that from a human point of view, he perfectly describes the situation as a no-win situation.

But Christians, who worship and adore a God who became human flesh, who suffered and died himself, well...we look at those choices as a false dichotomy. He said that his choices were death or suffering and death. But we have a third Word to consider: life. Even in the face of death, even—perhaps especially!—in the face of suffering, we find life. For while we are alive on this earth, we have the great gift of life, begun at our

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conception, and enjoyed until that moment when we die. And when we die, we confess a resurrection of the body; life again, even after sin and death have dealt their harshest blow! And even in suffering for the cause of the Gospel, we find life in a third way, for it was precisely through suffering that our Lord Jesus Christ took on the sins of the world. God redeems our own suffering just as He redeemed Christ's suffering. Had our Lord not suffered, had He somehow escaped the full wages of our sin, our atonement would have been rendered incomplete. But through suffering, God accomplishes His greatest gift for you: the forgiveness of sins.

From a human point of view, you only have death to choose from. Go down this road, and there is death. Go down that road, and there is death and suffering. But from God's point of view, in the wake of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, Christ's disciples find only life to choose from. We have life now, life after death, and even a fuller life in Christ when we suffer, especially when we suffer for the cause of the Gospel. This is what Paul is saying in that immortal text from Philippians 1:21, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Whether we live or whether we die, God can and will receive all glory and honor, for even in death does the Christian prosper.

"Well, Pastor, this all sounds very well and good," you may be saying. "But what about when I must suffer? Why is my life of any value when I can no longer care for myself, when I become a burden to others, when I can no longer even speak to proclaim the Gospel or serve others in need? Why would God want me to live a miserable life, a life dependent on others, when those people could be freed to do more good in the world?" Certainly, one feels compassion for those who suffer in the face of impending

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death. And as Lutherans, we know a thing or two about not wanting to be a burden on others. We can barely bring ourselves to accept a cup of coffee when it is offered! Only if we are certain that that coffee was no extra work and no trouble at all would we dare to accept such a generous offer, and we wouldn't dare think of asking anyone to go out of their way to actually make us a cup!

But we must not extend good manners or hospitality to matters of life and death, and we must not allow others to do the same. Remember the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet? Jesus, on the night of His betrayal, washes the disciples' feet to demonstrate how we serve others as He serves us. "He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?' Jesus answered him, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no share with me'" (John 13:6-8).

And so it is if we refuse to let Christ serve us, suffer for us, and die for us, we have no share with Him. Others, in the stead of Christ, have been gifted and vocated by God to serve us precisely in those times when we are in need, perhaps even facing an immanent, helpless death. Dare I say that Mrs. Ewart should have done everything in her power to convince her husband to live. If not because suicide is a sin, so that she could serve him in his hour of need. Not only did his suicide end his life, it cut off the opportunity to be served and the opportunity for others to serve. What we see as a burden, God sees as an opportunity for service. To shortchange a life that we determine as a burden is to shortchange opportunities for the love of God to be manifest in others.

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We are not the ones to determine if a life has value or not, if it is a burden or not, if it should be lived or not. To live is Christ and to die is gain. God, through His creation, through the incarnation of Jesus, through His redemptive death and His resurrection from the dead has proven again and again that His Word in the face of death is life. When the world says no, God says yes, no matter how helpless or desperate the situation. For that, all we can say is “Thanks be to God!” Amen.