

2013 Life Sunday Sermon

Text: Philippians 1:18b-26

Theme: Living with Dying

Rev. Dr. James I. Lamb, Executive Director of Lutherans For Life

On his death bed, an elderly pastor dictated a letter to his last remaining seminary classmate. He told his wife to write, "I am soon to leave the land of the living and will be with the dying." But after a pause he said, "No, no! Change that. I am soon to leave the land of the dying and will be with the living."

As this pastor understood, we all in one sense live with dying. We all live in a dying, sin-broken world and in dying, sin-broken bodies. Sin pays its wages of death. Unless the Lord returns, we will all receive those wages. No matter how robust we might be right now, no matter what advances might be made in medical science, death awaits us all. We all live with dying.

But we live with dying in other ways too. We live with dying if we have an illness that cannot be cured and will eventually take our life. We live with dying when we care for someone with such an illness. We live with dying if we have, or care for someone who has, a severe chronic disease that slowly kills physical or mental abilities. And we all live with dying because we live in a culture that increasingly turns to death as a solution to such problems. We live in a culture that defines the compassionate relief of suffering as eliminating the one suffering rather than the true meaning of compassion, "to suffer with" the one suffering. We live in a culture that turns caring into killing and promotes the message that certain people are "better off dead."

But this idea of being "better off dead" creeps into our thinking as well. Perhaps you know people or care for folks who are elderly or ill. They may never have said the words, "I'd be better off dead," but perhaps they expressed concern about being a burden on the family or wondered what possible purpose God has for their lives. Maybe you know someone who has asked, "Why doesn't God just call me home?" If you know someone who might think like this, or if you have ever had these kinds of thoughts, I've got good news for you today! We can honor

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Christ in both our living and our dying for He enables us both to live and to die in joyful faith.

Let's look at what Paul says about honoring Christ as we live with dying.

Paul lives with dying as he writes the Philippians. Imprisoned in Rome, he faces possible death. But he is ready for death. He wants Christ to be honored in his death. Paul says "to die is gain" and he desires "to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (23). Paul honors Christ in this joyful confidence because such confidence comes from Christ. What Christ did in His life, death, and resurrection gives Paul this assurance that things would be better in heaven with Christ.

As we live with dying, especially as in Paul's case where death may come soon, it's okay to join Paul in wanting to be with Christ. It's okay to want this for an elderly and feeble Christian grandparent or a desperately ill Christian friend. You know it would be better. You know it would be a gain, no more crying or pain or sickness or loneliness. We honor Christ in such thinking because He gives such confidence. He won the victory over death and the grave. He forgives your sins; He makes you worthy of the heavenly mansion He is preparing for you. Because of Christ, death becomes but a narrow gate into life eternal. As we live with dying, we can honor Christ in our death as the One who conquered death and brought life and immortality. He comforts us, calms our fears, and gives us patience as we await His call to join Him in eternity. We can honor Christ in our death for because of Him, "to die is gain."

But death is not the only possibility for Paul. He may very well live! If so, he knows Christ will be honored in his life. In fact, by the end of our text, Paul knows he will go on living. He is convinced that even though it would be "far better" for him to depart and be with Christ, it is "more necessary" (24) for the Philippians and others that Paul keep living. God has some

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“fruitful labor” (22) yet to accomplish through Paul. Christ will be honored through Paul as He moves people along in their faith and increases their joy. Paul writes, “so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again” (26). Christ will be honored as He works in Paul’s life.

Living with dying also means understanding that death is not the only possibility for the elderly or disabled or ill or even the unconscious. Such folks may very well live a number of years. As we said, it is certainly okay to desire to depart and be with Christ for that would be “far better.” But God is in charge of the time of death. As the children’s book says, “God will decide when I should die, and the time will be just right ... because God is very wise.” But as long as He gives life, we must believe that in God’s wisdom it is “more necessary” for life to continue. And as long as God gives life, God gives life meaning and purpose. God has some “fruitful labor” left to accomplish just as He did in Paul.

Now you might say, “But Paul was different. He traveled all over the world. He preached, and taught others about Jesus. But what about people not so able, those who cannot get around well or maybe are not even aware of their surroundings? What possible ‘fruitful labor’ could they do?” But remember, it wasn’t Paul. It was Christ in Paul who was accomplishing this fruitful labor. Christ was honored in Paul’s life because Christ was the one at work in Paul’s life. We limit the power of God if we say He can work and accomplish things only in people who are young and healthy and up and around. He’s God! He can work in your life as well as in the life of Paul. He can work in the life of the chronically ill or the terminally ill or the bed-ridden grandma unaware of her surroundings. Christ isn’t exalted because of what we do. He is exalted

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because of what He does in us! In fact, you could say that the less we are able to do, the more Christ is exalted as He works through us!

Remember the man born blind? What a tragic thing this must have appeared to be to friends and family. But this man was born blind that the works of God might be displayed in him. He was born blind that Christ might be exalted in him. He wasn't aware of it. Friends and family were not aware of it, but this man's life had purpose and meaning. You may not be aware of how God is at work in your life, or in the life of the severely ill or disabled. But through faith in His abiding presence, you can be assured He is.

Have you ever thought that maybe grandma is in that nursing home bed so others can care for her? Scripture tells us that when we serve those in need, we are serving Christ Himself. Think of it, grandma may very well be Christ to many, many people as they serve her. What a great honor! The same could be said about a whole host of people that our culture thinks would be "better off dead." Christ may not be done honoring Himself through them yet. What an insult to Jesus to want to kill those through whom He is still at work. **[Perhaps you have an elderly person or a person with a disability in your congregation you could use as an example here of someone through whom God continues to work.]**

Now certainly we can and should allow the dying to die. When a person's body starts to give up and shut down, we can discontinue treatment that no longer enhances life but merely prolongs the dying process. We must guard against any action, however, that would *cause* someone to die.

As an example, I'm sure most of us remember the Terri Schiavo case in Florida several years ago. Terri had a severe brain injury that left her in a minimally conscious state. But all of

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her bodily functions worked. She was not dying. Because she could not swallow food, a feeding tube was inserted to give her nutrition and hydration. Her husband wanted to remove the feeding tube, but her parents tried to stop this action. That's what caused the big court case that went all the way to the U. S. Congress. But eventually the feeding tube was removed and Teri died thirteen days later. So did removing her feeding tube *allow* Teri to die or did it *cause* her to die? The autopsy report was very clear. The cause of death was not "brain injury" but rather "severe dehydration." Removing her feeding tube *caused* Terri Schiavo to die.

We can never be sure how Christ might be at work in someone's life like Terri's. What we can be sure of is that Christ is at work! And I repeat, as long as God gives life, then God is at work giving life meaning and purpose. As long as God gives life, life has value and it is "more necessary" to keep on living.

Now, we need to add something very important here. Most of the time it is very easy to decide whether a certain action will allow someone to die or cause them to die. But sometimes it is not so easy and decisions become very difficult and emotionally draining and can even cause conflict within families. In such times of uncertainty, the Christian finds strength and comfort in the certainty of Christ's presence. We prayerfully make our decision and commend it and our loved one to Jesus trusting that He will work through it. And if at some point in time we look back at a decision made and we now realize that it may have been a wrong decision, our strength and comfort come from the certainty of Christ's presence and the grace in which we live. We can bring any guilt or uncertainty to Him, lay it at the foot of His cross, and receive His peace. We can hear Him say, "Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1a).

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Yes, we all live with dying in one sense or another. We also live in a culture that does not know how to live with dying and turns to death as a solution to the problems of life. Increasingly, people say that certain others would be “better off dead.” Paul reminded us today that as we live with dying, Christ comforts us with the certainty that it would be “far better” to depart and be with Him. But he also reminded us that as we live with dying the timing belongs to God. If He gives us continued life, then in His plan, it is “more necessary” that we go on living. But you see, whether we live or die we know that Christ is at work and that He will be honored. And so we pray with the hymn writer, “Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes. Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. In life, in death, O Lord, Abide with me.” In life, in death, O Lord, may You be honored. Amen.