
What is the Wise Way to Deal with Death?

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Proper 24B in the Revised Common Lectionary
Job 38:1-7, 34-41
Mark 10:35-45

The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind,
"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"
--Job 38.1

Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant."
--Mark 10:43

Recently, there was a church Bible study group discussing the tragic possibility of sudden death. The leader said, "You know, we will all die some day; and none of us really knows when. But if we did know, wouldn't we all do a better job of preparing ourselves?" Everybody nodded their heads in agreement with this comment.

So he continued, "What would you do if you knew you only had 4 weeks of life remaining before your death, before your Great Judgment Day?" One guy said, "For those 4 weeks, I would go out into my community and preach the Gospel to those that have not yet accepted Jesus into their lives." "A very admirable thing to do," said the group leader.

A lady then said, "For me during those 4 weeks, I would dedicate all of my remaining time to serving my family, my church, and my world with a greater conviction." "That's wonderful!" the group leader commented.

Then, one guy in the back finally spoke up loudly. "For those 4 weeks, I would travel throughout the whole United States with my mother-in-law in a little Ford Escort, and we would stay in a Motel 6 every night."
Everybody was puzzled by his answer. "Why would you do that?" the group leader asked. The man smiled, "Because, it would be the longest 4 weeks of my life!"

My apologies to mothers-in-law! Despite that humor of that joke, the subject of my sermon this morning is serious. Why do people die? What happens to us when we die? What is the wise way to deal with death?

Some scholars believe that the question of death is the original philosophical question. They say that it is the question that

began all of philosophy and maybe all of religion. Maybe it is the question that began human consciousness. Maybe what makes us distinctly human is that we are somehow able to reflect upon what death means. We may not have answers to the question, but we do think about it.

I certainly remember when I began to think about death. Sometimes I think that the deaths I experienced as child were what prompted me to consider religion, and to consider being a priest.

When I was quite young, one of my early friends died of a brain tumor; then my aunt died of cancer. By the time I was fifteen years old, three of my childhood friends had died, one of leukemia, two of asthma. Then, another two died in automobile accidents. There were no easy answers to those tragedies.

And my life is not unusual that way. Each of us here this morning has experienced some sort of death. Some of you have seen the death of your own spouses, or dear children, or certainly parents. Great people have died. There are no easy answers to those tragedies.

There are no easy answers about death, but that does not stop us from trying to speak about death. Thus it has been, and thus it will always be.

No matter what our culture or our religion, our communities have offered us some reflection about death, or about suffering. Some of the great pieces of literature have been about death. So it is that one of the great books of Judaism and Christianity is about suffering and death.

It is the story of Job, the patient and faithful man of God, who was nevertheless struck with all manner of suffering. It was his plight to suffer by experiencing the death of those closest to him: his family. The Book of Job is long and painful. Job cries out with lament, and his suffering is made even more intense by the empty consolation offered by his friends. His friends mean well, but they are unable to explain, unable to accurately justify Job's suffering.

Job defends God publicly, but internally he is asking God the unanswerable questions about death. Finally, God does speak to Job, and to us, with those mighty words: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" "What do you know?"

Our human cultural stories do have a word about suffering and death, but it is a hard word to accept. The word is that we will never know. Death is an irrational and illogical, non-solvable fact of life. We will die, all of us will die; and we can do little about its timing or circumstances.

The unknowability of death is what drives us to reflection and philosophy. It is what drives us to religion, to the realization of a higher power, a power that might be larger and stronger even than death. In our Bible, the books of Ecclesiastes and Job and Proverbs make up the so-called wisdom literature; they are ways that bright and thoughtful people have sought to explain the unexplainable features of the world. And they do a good job. I love that literature. For instance, I love this portion of Psalm 104 which is part of our lectionary today; Psalm 104 has features similar to the wisdom literature of ancient Egyptian culture. The story of Job is one of the universal stories of humanity, no matter what our religion.

For Christians, however, the story of Job is not the last word. Job is a powerful and serious story; but, for Christians, the story of Job is completed in the story of Jesus Christ. For Jesus is really another version of Job. Jesus, too, is the innocent victim. Jesus encounters unjustified suffering. Jesus is misunderstood by his friends. And, finally, contrary, to Job, Jesus actually dies himself.

The life of Jesus does offer us a way to deal with death. It is not an easy way, but it is the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is to

live through death and not to avoid it. The avoidance of death, acting as if death does not exist, makes people act unrealistically in other parts of their life. I believe that it is our absurd attempt to avoid death that creates much unreality and anxiety in our lives. Ernst Becker investigated this anxiety in his great book, *The Denial of Death*. Jesus, at a minimum, teaches us to face death, to be realistic about death.

But the gospel this morning offers us another way to deal with death. We have heard the story before, another account of the disciples of Jesus arguing among themselves about who is the greatest, who would sit next to Jesus in glory. This time, the incident provokes Jesus to offer some words about service. "The person who would be greatest among you is the one who serves," says Jesus.

"The person who would be greatest among you is the one who serves." These are powerful words about how to live. However, this morning, I want to offer those words to us as a way to deal with death. The one who is greatest is the one who knows how to deal with death; and the way to deal with death is to learn how to serve.

Consider this definition of death: Death is about loss. Death is another term for loss. In death we lose something we cherish, maybe our father or mother, our husband or wife, or child, or brother or sister or best friend. Finally, in death we lose our very own life. Death is about loss.

But the way of Jesus teaches us about loss daily. If we are being faithful to Jesus, we are learning every day what it means to lose something. Sometimes, our losses are unintentional. None of us wanted to lose so much money as we have in the last year and half. None of us intended to lose jobs and wealth and security. The losses have been painful. People of faith, however, have learned something valuable in these last eighteen months of loss. They have learned how to serve. They have learned that no matter how much they have lost, they still have something with which they can serve. They still have something to give away to others; it may be time, it may be wisdom, it may still be things of smaller material value.

The followers of Jesus know what it is to serve others. When we serve others, we are giving something away. Indeed, we are losing something. The more we serve, the more we learn to lose things. We might lose our priority in things, we might lose our place in line, we might lose the best seats in the house - to sit at the right hand of the place of honor - we might lose the piece of pie we were saving for ourselves. When we serve, we learn to lose things.

But here is the amazing miracle that Jesus offers us in that service. When we give things away, we get something back. When we give our lives away, we get something stronger back. Jesus said, "The person who loses his life for my sake, will gain his soul."

During these last eighteen months of loss, financial and economic loss, to be sure, but also other kinds of loss, some people have learned a lot about Christian faith. Christian faith is about giving things away, about losing things of value, and then receiving back a hundredfold.

I believe, ultimately, that this is the lesson Jesus teaches us about death itself. If death is about loss, the ultimate loss, then the best way we can prepare for death is by learning to lose things. Maybe we should learn to lose something every day. When we serve others, we give something of value to them; we lose something to ourselves and give something to others.

Yes, the great literature of the world is about the unexplainable mystery of death. What happens when we die is unanswerable this side of the event. But the great morality of the world, the morality of Jesus, is about serving others. In the midst of death and in the midst of loss, Jesus says that the greatest among us will be the ones who serve. They learn, over and over again, and day by day, that when we serve, we lose something. Yes, we learn to lose things. But we gain our soul; we gain glory. We gain eternal life!

AMEN.

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