

THE RIGHT WAY TO DIE

(02/05/12)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 22:14-23

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)

As I have mentioned on several occasions, I come to worship every Sunday with an attitude of openness and expectancy. This is because I never know what part of the service will touch me. It may be a passage of scripture. It may come while listening to an introit or anthem. It often occurs through the words of a hymn. But practically every Sunday the transcendent breaks through into this world of space and time; I encounter it or it encounters me.

It may be experienced as a feeling, as a point in the service when, in the words of the great Reformer John Wesley, "I find my heart strangely warmed." I might be reading a passage of scripture or singing the third verse of a hymn that I hardly know, and I get choked up. I may even be moved to tears. I consider those moments to be little epiphanies, little religious experiences.

Not surprisingly, since I am basically a "thinking" type rather than a "feeling" type, I sometimes experience this moment as an insight. I read something, perhaps even something I have read a hundred times before, and I see it in a new way, I see it in a new light. I also consider this "aha!" moment to be an epiphany, a religious experience. I consider any experience, whether it is cognitive or affective, that helps me to deepen my relationship with God to be or function as a religious experience.

Several months ago I had this kind of experience while I was saying the Words of Consecration during our observance of the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

I was picturing Jesus sitting at table with his disciples at their Passover observance. Jesus knew that this was not an ordinary Passover meal; it was that, to be sure, but it was also more than that. It was his Last Supper with his disciples.

As he sat at table with them, Jesus knew what was going to happen. He knew that he needed to go into the Garden of Gethsemane to be with God in prayer. He knew that his closest friends would fall asleep. He knew that when he was arrested, they would desert him. He knew that Peter would deny him and that Judas would betray him. He knew that if God did not remove this cup from him, he would be flogged, that he would have a crown of thorns smashed down on his head, and that he would die a painful death on the cross. And he knew he would do this alone.

I was picturing all this as I held the piece of bread. As I said the Words of Consecration one word in particular jumped out at me. That was the word "thanks."

There are three descriptions of the Last Supper in the gospels. When we compare them, it is apparent that Matthew copied Mark, the first gospel to be written, practically word for word, while Luke's version is only slightly different. There is no account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John. In its place we have the account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet and giving them the new commandment: that they should love one another as he has loved them.

In Luke we read:

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Think about it. At that moment in his life Jesus not only remembered to give thanks, he was thankful. How could he possibly be thankful at a time like that? How could he possibly feel gratitude in his heart knowing full well what was to come? When someone can do something like that, I get very curious. I want to know how he did it. I want to know how he can live a present or face a future that is much worse than anything I ever have or probably ever will experience, and still be thankful. I suspect that it has something to do with his faith, with the quality of his relationship with God.

In these words of consecration Jesus is telling us how to die properly; he is showing us how to die properly. He is also teaching and showing us how to live. If we know the right way to die, we will also know the right way to live. If we know the right way to live, we will also know the right way to die.

From what I understand to be a central theme of both Christian and Buddhist spirituality, it seems to me that it involves living life fully in the present. Jesus did not allow his anticipation of tremendous physical and emotional pain in the immanent future to cloud his experience of being with his disciples around the table. He did not allow his precognition of their inadequacies to prevent him from accepting them, from caring about them, and from loving them.

There is a packaged program that is making the rounds of churches across the nation. It is entitled "One Month to Live." It basically asks us to consider what we would do with our lives, specifically what we would do differently if we knew we had only one month to live.

I think the program is timely. We suffered through apocalyptic prophecies at the time of the millennium that did not come to pass. We had two predictions of the end of the world last year, but neither apparently ushered in the Rapture. We now have to live with the great anxiety of knowing that the Maya calendar comes to an end on December 21; we wonder if they knew something that we don't.

I remember as a young boy talking about the end times with my father following a sermon about this theme that we heard in church. My dad told me that he heard a story about Francis of Assisi, whom you know is my patron saint. My dad said that Francis was out plowing a field one day when someone asked him what he would do if he knew that the world were going to come to an end tomorrow. Francis said that he would go on plowing the field.

I would like to have the attitude, the faith stance of St. Francis. I would like to live like St. Francis and die like St. Francis. After all, if you are doing what you should be doing with your life, why would you do something different? I think a quick trip to church to repent would be a waste of time. As they say in the theatre, a good exit can't cancel out a bad performance.

I think the secret of a good death is the same as a good life: to live in the present – with gratitude, with a spirit of thanksgiving for the gift that God has given us. There is a Zen story that illustrates this point.

A man was being chased by a hungry tiger. To escape he grabbed ahold of a vine and lowered himself over the edge of a ledge. However, when he looked down he saw another tiger waiting for him on the ground. He couldn't go up and he couldn't go down. At that point he realized that two little mice, one white and one black, were beginning to gnaw through the vine.

As the man hung there, with no way to escape his immanent death, he noticed a beautiful wild strawberry that was growing out of the rocks just within his reach. He reached out, plucked the strawberry, and placed it in his mouth. It was unbelievably delicious!

I think Jesus knew at the time of the Last Supper that there was no way that he could escape death. But this did not prevent him from enjoying a last meal with his friends. It also did not prevent him from affirming his relationship with God. When he took the bread, he gave thanks for the joy of this last meal, for the joy of this piece of bread. Then he blessed it, he broke it, and he shared it with his friends.

I would like to share a fantasy with you, but it can't go any further than here. It's just between you and me. I wouldn't want anyone outside this church to get the impression that I am not playing with a full deck.

I often think about what I would do if I were in prison about to be executed for some crime. I haven't quite figured out why I would be there. I know that I annoy some people by being a Yankee fan, for my liberal theology or my more than marginal propensity to find parallels between Christian and Buddhist spirituality, but I don't think this should justify my execution. Anyway, on my eve of my execution the warden asks me what I would like for my last meal.

For a long time I thought, "Who cares?" Why would it make any difference what I ate or drank since I was going to be executed the following morning? I did think that if my last meal came immediately before the execution I would choose something that would take a long time to eat. I can picture telling the guards that I have to chew each mouthful forty times for, as we all know, this is good for our digestion. However, they would probably see through this clever ruse and interrupt my leisurely breakfast when it was time for me to take my seat in the electric chair.

For a long time I thought, "How could I possibly enjoy a meal at a time like that?" What I ate or drank would probably be the last thing on my mind. Then I remembered the Zen story of the man fleeing the tiger. When there is no way out, *and trust me, there is no way out for any of us*, the secret of both living and dying with gratitude and peace in our hearts is to enjoy the strawberry.

My favorite meal is meat loaf, baked potato, and my wife's green bean casserole. Since I wouldn't have to worry about my cholesterol numbers, I would want bacon strips on the top of the meat loaf, onion rings on top of the casserole, and I lot of real creamery butter for the baked potato. I've made up my mind. If I ever find myself on death row the evening before my execution, this is what I will order. When it comes, I would like to give thanks. Then I hope I will truly and fully enjoy it.

Last week, in my reflection on little Cole's life and death, I shared my curiosity about him and about his parents. I wonder what kind of religious background his parents have, even more what kind of faith they have that enables

them to not only endure tremendous heartbreak but also transcend it. I wonder what kind of parents would only ask for one thing this Christmas – that their son might stay alive long enough to be with them for Christmas, and that they might be granted the opportunity, the blessing, the gift of being able to be with him, holding his hand when he died. They were thankfully granted both of these wishes. I hope that I would be able to live as they did under the same or similar circumstances.

I also wonder what kind of faith little Cole had. I am not particularly interested in his religious beliefs, in what he believed about the incarnation, the atonement and the divinity of Christ. I am interested in his faith, in the quality of his relationship with God however he got this and however he might or might not be able to articulate it. I suspect he had something deep and beautiful inside him or he would not have been able to carry his cross with the courage that he so obviously did. I hope I would be able to live as Cole did and die as Cole did were I to find myself in a similar situation.

Since I have never met Cole and his parents, and probably never will, this was just a fantasy on my part. I was imagining Cole and his parents, how they were present to each other at the time of Cole's passing. Then, after the service, I discovered I was correct in my imagination. I like to be correct.

At the coffee hour, Sharon told me what really happened at the time of Cole's death. Cole turned to his parents and his sister, said "Smile. Be happy." Then he died.

Don't tell me this little kid didn't have something special deep inside him. Don't try to tell me that he didn't "get it." No one says something like that without a deep and meaningful religious faith!

I think Cole and his parents simply enjoyed the last moment that they spent together. They were thankful that they could share this very intimate moment with each other. It was their equivalent of eating an absolutely delicious strawberry, of enjoying a last meal of meat loaf, baked potato and green bean casserole. It was their incarnation of the spirit that Jesus brought to his last supper with his disciples, how he gave thanks for the bread, for the cup, and for the opportunity to be with the ones he loved. As Jesus showed us, just because we are facing death this is no reason not to be thankful.

As we gather around this table with a table covering that calls us to remember, let us remember the lesson that Jesus not only taught but which he also lived. He showed us the right way to die, which coincidentally is the right way to live. If we are totally present to the wonder, to the gifts that are ours right here in the present, no matter what lies before us our hearts will be truly thankful.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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