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The Second Sunday after Pentecost

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form on our “Pod Cast” site as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lessons: Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8

“She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” (Mark 14:8-9)

I know I am stating the obvious when I say that this has been a difficult year-and-a-half. With the pandemic, the pandemic restrictions and its disruption of our lives along with the social and political turmoil, the increasing polarization of our citizenry around basic issues of democracy and racial equality, most of us have felt discouraged, even beaten down by life. Many of the people with whom I converse, even if they have not contracted COVID or suffered financial hardship, experience what could be described as a chronic low-grade depression or dysthymia. Many, including myself, experience a loss of stamina or endurance: tasks that previously were done easily now take the starch out of us.

One of the most painful and also the most anxiety-provoking themes of this past year has been the matter of death. A lot of people have died this past year—many from COVID or COVID complications. Some of us believe that many of these deaths were unnecessary, that they were preventable. Since the pandemic began, approximately 18,000 people have died from COVID in

Massachusetts, approximately 600,000 in the United States, and approximately 3.6 million people around the world. In our own little church, 5 members have died, several from COVID or complications from COVID. When a church's membership hovers around 35 active members, 5 is approximately 14% of our total membership. A feeling of loss hangs heavy over our little church.

This year has caused or led a lot of us to think about the matter of death. The pandemic has stirred up feelings of vulnerability. Perhaps we have always been vulnerable (actually we were and are), but we didn't always *feel* vulnerable. Remember, denial is not just a river in Africa! Now we actually *feel* vulnerable. We have a clear and present sense of the transient nature of life, the transient nature of our life. We have had a glimpse of what the Buddhists call impermanence, the impermanence of everything—including us.

This past year we learned that a chance encounter with a stranger, if both of us were not properly masked, observing social distance, and/or vaccinated could cost us our life. A hug and a kiss from a friend, a loved one could cost us our life. And we have come to realize that we ourselves could be carriers of death. This is a sobering realization, but it has helped many of us to be socially responsible, to conduct our lives, our daily activities with an abundance of care and concern, and to make whatever sacrifices we needed to make to comport ourselves in a responsible manner.

On some level we know that we live with death. As the Yaqui mystic, Don Juan, tells Carlos Castenada, death is always just over our left shoulder. I wonder if this is what Roger Waters of Pink Floyd means when, in "Comfortably Numb," he writes,

*When I was a child,
I caught a fleeting glimpse
Out of the corner of my eye
I turned to look, but it was gone
I cannot put my finger on it now
The child is grown, the dream is gone
I have become comfortably numb.*

I have a sense that Waters may have been talking about death, though he may have also been talking about authenticity since authenticity generally requires the symbolic death of our unconscious commitment to social conformity. But that's not the point. The point is that death is an integral part of life. Life and death go

together. We have to learn to live with death, the death of those whom we love and our own eventual or impending death as we journey through life.

Death is what we would call an existential issue—it affects everyone; it is an integral part of existence. Depth psychologists believe that the fear of death is the fear beneath all fears, all anxieties. Think about it. When I say that I am afraid to fly in a plane, what is it that I fear? Do I fear heights? If so, why? Is it really heights that I fear or the consequences of a sudden, uncontrolled rapid descent from a height of several miles? It appears that on some deep ontological level, we are wired to do our best to forestall the inevitable, to keep it at arm's length. Neurotic people are just more highly sensitive to this matter of survival; they don't want to take any chances, no matter the extent to which their avoidance behavior inconveniences them—or others. Neurotic people just want to live, which is perfectly understandable! The problem is that they don't seem to understand statistics and the “laws” of probability!

I know this doesn't sound like a particularly upbeat theme for this week's reflection, particularly when we are just beginning to enjoy a touch of summer this weekend and a measured return to a more normal range of activities. There are several reasons why I have selected this topic. First, it builds on the themes of crucifixion, resurrection, and the post-resurrection encounters between Jesus and the disciples that are central to the Lenten and Easter seasons. Second, as I have suggested in several recent reflections, our more than marginal propensity to dichotomize, a tendency that is supported by the structure of our language, blinds us to the possibility that life and death may not be the discrete entities that we commonly take them to be; they may be two dimensions of a unity, and, as such, there might actually be no death. Third, since many of us feel the pain of separation from loved ones who have died, we need to consider the possibility that they might not actually be separated from us, that they might be closer to us than we think.

In addition, it seems to me that in the near or distant future, many, if not most of us are going to die. We are told that the only two things that are certain in this life are death and taxes. Until recently, we would have also listed the presence of the New England Patriots in the Super Bowl and the Red Sox on the bottom of the standings in the American League East. Actually, as many individual multi-billionaires and several very large multi-national corporations have discovered, it is not impossible to avoid paying taxes. But, once again, that's not the point.

Many years ago, in his book entitled *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker suggested that, even though on one level we know that we are going to die, we tend to act as if death is not a reality, not an integral part of life. He said we not only don't want to talk about death; we don't even want to think about it. We act as if it will never happen to us and we run away from it in several different ways. You know the saying, "You can run, but you can't hide." I'm afraid there is no advantage to sticking our head in the sand when it comes to death. It would be far more productive to think about it and talk about it. Our advantage as Christians (or whatever we are) is that we can do so from a religious perspective.

Today's scripture lesson, the anointing of Jesus, appears in three of the four gospels. The passages in Matthew and Mark are practically identical, which shows that Matthew must have copied the passage word-for-word from Mark. Luke, for some strange reason, chose to omit this encounter between Jesus and the woman from his gospel. As we heard, the account in John differs from that of Mark at several points.

In Mark the incident takes place two days before the beginning of Passover; in John it happens six days before Passover. In Mark the incident takes place following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem; in John it happens prior to his entry. In Mark the anointing takes place in the house of Simon the leper; in John it takes place in the house of Lazarus. In Mark the person anointing Jesus is described as a woman; in John she is identified as Mary, the sister of Lazarus. In Mark the woman anoints Jesus' head; in John she anoints his feet.

As we have noted when examining other parallel passages of scripture, these discrepancies apparently did not trouble the persons who compiled the gospels. They did not feel the need to make all the accounts of what happened agree. I believe this is because they did not consider the Bible to be the inerrant word of God, but rather the record of people's experiences of God and people's experiences of Jesus. Since some people remembered parts of the history that others did not remember, and since we know that the memories of the same incident by several people often differ, it was not surprising to the writers of the gospels that the accounts or descriptions are not identical.

At the end of the passage, Jesus defends the woman's actions. As recorded in the gospel of John, Jesus tells the woman's critics she purchased the ointment for his future burial. In Mark he says, "She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial." I find the earlier version in Mark to be the more powerful of the two. The woman is preparing Jesus for his death.

The passage tells us something about the way Jesus faces his death. He realizes he is going to die, probably within the week. When he breaks bread with his disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus tells them it will be his last meal with them. When the woman anoints him in advance of his burial, he not only calmly allows her to do this; he praises her for her ministry to him.

Over the twenty-five years that I taught a course in Psychology of Religion at Assumption College, I always included a section on existentialism. I did this to give the students some background information on the themes that Viktor Frankl addresses in *Man's Search for Meaning*, which was initially entitled *From Death Camp to Existentialism*. I pointed out to them that existentialist philosophers, psychologists, and theologians emphasize the importance of freedom, choice, and responsibility. They tell us we cannot always choose the conditions of our life, what Martin Heidegger called the *Umwelt*, the givenness of life and of our life. They tell us that these conditions, however, are not causes; they do not have the power to define us. They can never separate us from what Heidegger called our *Eigenwelt*, our individuality, that which carries the possibility of creative self-realization. We cannot always choose the conditions or situations that life hands us, but we *can always choose how we respond*. We can choose *the attitude we bring* to the unalterable conditions of our lives.

When I taught this course, I always gave the class a copy of a cartoon that I found many years ago. In the cartoon, a man is standing with his back to a wall, his hands tied behind him. He is facing a firing squad, six men with their rifles trained on him. The question I raised for my students was, "If you were in this man's position, facing the certainty of immanent death, what would you do in the last few moments of your life?"

No one in the class voted for trying to run away. No one wanted to whimper and plead for mercy. To a person, they wanted to comport themselves with dignity. They understood that their last act should be a defining moment, what the existentialist psychologist Viktor Frankl calls "the actualization of a transcendent meaning." In this act, if they chose properly, they could rise above their executioners. At the very least they wanted to make a statement. As one student put it, "I would like my death to be as meaningful a statement as my life." Beautiful! This kind of statement, this depth of insight gives me confidence that their generation will do a better job of running the world than our generation did. (Actually, they couldn't do much worse—but, again, that's not the point.)

In the cartoon, a small stone is lying at the man's feet. With his foot, the man kicks the stone toward the soldiers. It is a relatively insignificant action. It will not make much of a difference, at least to the outcome of the situation. But it is an act of defiance. It is a statement to his executioners that they can kill his body, but they cannot kill his spirit. I asked the students what they thought about this man's response to his existential plight.

The students liked it. Some came up with several alternative responses. Several voted for charging at the soldiers. They reasoned that if you are going to die anyway, why not go down fighting? One said he would stand there in silence, not blinking, not flinching, but simply staring into the eyes of his executioners. No fear! One said he would suddenly give the command to "fire!" By giving the command to fire, he explained that he would be transforming himself from a passive victim into one who chooses the moment of his death. I liked this. I playfully suggested that, confronted with that scenario, I might be inclined to sing a line or two from a Pat Benatar song: *Hit Me With Your Best Shot*. It goes,

*Hit me with your best shot,
Hit me with your best shot,
Hit me with your best shot,
Fire away!*

For those of you who are listening to the audio version of this reflection, I will spare you from my rendition of this 1980 rock classic.

In an effort to move them, especially the young men in the class away from their obsession with the warrior archetype, I would make a few other playful suggestions. I said I might ask the soldiers to wait a minute because I had to tie my shoe. After bending down and pretending to tie my shoe I would straighten up and tell them that I was just kidding, I really didn't have to tie my shoe! They would probably be annoyed and would then blow me away, but I would go down laughing. I also suggested that you can always stall a firing squad by pretending to sneeze because (I believe) it's a rule that you can't shoot someone when he/she is in the middle of a sneeze. I mean, think about it; would you shoot someone who was in the act of sneezing? I think not!

My suggestions were not meant to be profound. They are probably not what I would actually do in that situation; I just wanted to make a point. If we truly do not fear death, we can treat it like a joke, a great cosmic joke. In poking fun at our death, we would be poking fun at the executioners, who may expect us to cower and plead for mercy. We would be poking fun at the many ways we

deny or run from death. We actually would be poking fun at death itself. I think laughter in the face of death is a viable option for an existentialist, a Zen Buddhist, or a Christian.

One young woman in my class said she would spend her last moments in prayer; she would die reciting the Lord's Prayer. Not bad! Another said she would simply smile at the soldiers. She would use her last moments to forgive them. Another young woman said she would listen carefully to see if she could hear the song of a bird. She would like to die hearing the song of a bird. She would like to die looking at the rising sun not in fear, as the harbinger of her execution, but as her friend. She said if there were a flower on the ground, she would just open herself to that flower in the last moments of her life. Her suggestions brought tears to my eyes. They were much more sensitive and Christian, much more profound expressions of faith than my option of faking a sneeze!

I know that young women at that age are generally more mature than young men, but it is humbling when several young women showed themselves to be more spiritually mature than their highly credentialed teacher who is roughly the age of their grandfather! Once again, this restores my faith in this emerging generation.

How would we face death if we were standing before a firing squad? Our response tells us a lot about ourselves and about our faith. If you see where I am heading with this, you may have grasped that the question is not entirely hypothetical, for we are all facing a firing squad or one kind or another. We are all facing death. It may come sooner; it may come later; it may come quickly; it may come slowly; but it will come. The question, then, is not how we *would* face death but how we *will* face death.

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus tells the disciples what is to happen to him:

Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Jesus apparently does not have a problem facing his immanent death. Peter is the one with the problem. He advises Jesus to choose a path that would avoid pain, suffering, and death. Peter's response to death is the response of fear. Jesus challenges Peter to set his mind on higher things, on divine things.

Peter's fear response emerges again following Jesus' arrest.

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth. But Peter denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again, he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." But Peter began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times. And Peter broke down and wept.

If Peter's response to the threat of death is the response of fear, then Jesus' response to death is the response of faith. Peter is concerned about his body. Peter mistakenly believes that the death of his body will be the end of his existence.

Jesus is not concerned about his body. He tells us in Luke 12:4, "Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more." Jesus is honest about his fear when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. After all, he is human like us. He is not into suffering, especially unnecessary, undeserved suffering. But he does not allow his fear to overwhelm him, to turn him aside from his authentic path.

In existentialist terms, Jesus knows he cannot control the conditions of his life, the *Umwelt*. In fact, he is not particularly interesting in doing this. He also has no desire to sacrifice his authenticity, his call, to fit neatly into what Heidegger calls the *Mitwelt*, the world with us, the world of social relationships. He knows that his preaching about the kingdom of God will be perceived as threatening to the religious authorities in Jerusalem as well as the Roman occupying force. But he is committed to the expression of his *Eigenwelt*, his singularity, his authenticity, his individuality—his call, no matter what the price. He will drink from the cup that God or life has handed him.

Existentialists tell us that we need to break through the veil of denial and the paralyzing effect of fear to face the reality of our death. The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich calls this moment of realization “the shock of nonbeing.” When we realize that someday, a day that may come sooner rather than later, we will no longer exist, this realization or epiphany leads to two possible responses. For some people, knowing that life will end in death makes life meaningless. For others, knowing that we are finite, that we are temporal, that this form with which we so strongly identify will someday become a casualty of entropy, that it will fade away, makes every single moment supremely valuable!

The fear of death is the greatest or ultimate fear; it underlies all other fears, all other anxieties. If we identify with or are attached to not only our physical body but also our self-image, our persona, our reputation, the fear of embarrassment or failure is also grounded in a fear of death—the death or destruction of our self-image. Death, whether literal or symbolic, challenges our attachment to this transient form. If we can face death with the response of faith rather than fear, all these other fears will simply dissolve. In the words of the American Zen master Charlotte Joko Beck, in her book *Everyday Zen*, it is not that we drive out or eliminate our attachments, the source of our anxiety; we simply see through them. We see how essentially empty they are. Then they dissolve like sandcastles on the beach in the face of an incoming tide.

The fear of different kinds of literal or symbolic deaths is a crippling fear because we experience *many deaths in a single lifetime*. There is a death that comes to us when we lose a loved one. There is a death that we experience when we become critically or terminally ill. The loss of our health, our sight, or our hearing is a kind of death. There is a death that comes when the package we have put together so carefully falls apart or is rudely torn apart by the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” We all must face these deaths. We may face them sooner rather than later. We may face them once or many times. When we face them, when our back is to the wall and the firing squad is poised, how will we define ourselves? Can we speak an authentic word? Can we make an authentic gesture?

I invite us to face our death, the death of our body, and our many other deaths as Jesus did, not with the response of fear but with the response of faith. If we do so, we will find that, like the man with his back to the wall, we can rise above whatever it is that threatens us. We can make not only our last moments but *all* the moments of our life, all the moments between now and our death, moments of creative self-realization. If we are not afraid of death, either the big

death or the little deaths, death can become a deepening and a freeing experience. It can lead to resurrection, to rebirth.

Jesus tells us that death is an integral part of the spiritual journey. He tells us, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit.” Even prayer can be a kind of death; actually, it *should* be a kind of death. In true prayer, we are not trying to bend God’s will to coincide with ours; we are trying to die to our egocentricity that our will might coincide with God’s. When this happens, we die to our old self so that the new self, the self that is grounded in Christ, might emerge.

Let us continue our journey through this post-Easter season as followers of Jesus. Let us take on his mind and his heart. Just as Jesus did, let us face into the many deaths that we experience or will experience with courage, dignity, grace, compassion, and perhaps even a sense of humor. Then we might experience the resurrection that can transform our lives and help us to transcend the burdens and crosses that we bear.

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