

Aug 11

The Victory of Life

I Corinthians 15: 50-58

As I shared last week, the truth is that we all have been given the diagnosis that we have a terminal illness. I bet your physician has not told you this fact? The terminal condition? It is called, life. Because we are alive, we will die. Today I want us to talk about living with joy even if you are dying or maybe because you are dying.

We live in a death denying culture. We need to embrace the idea that we all die and see it not as an aberration but a reality. When we do this, we can begin to truly live. You think we don't live in a death denying culture? Just a few generations ago when a family member died the mortician dressed the body, put it in a coffin, usually of pine, and then it was brought back to your living room. The coffin was placed on a couple of saw horses and opened, and family members were supposed to sit with the body until the day of the funeral when it would be taken to the church for services and then to the graveyard for burial. Often a photographer was called in to take a picture of the deceased because none had been taken recently and the family wanted a remembrance. That is dealing with the reality of death. Also, there were prescribed rituals for mourning. They were different in different places but some rituals included wearing black for a period of time, stopping clocks at the time of death, putting black bunting around the front door, and more. Almost every family dealt with death in a very personal way. Infant and child mortality was high, women died young, often from complications of child birth, men died young as well from accidents and all succumbed to infections because there were no antibiotics. Death was a ritualized part of life. There was no escaping it.

Now, we rarely have a body present for a memorial service. We do not have rituals for dealing with death. Many families only experience death among their most elderly members. We often see death as tragic. We become angry with God, who seemingly has let us down. We do not embrace it as part of the flow of life.

Because of this, we sometimes hear the great affirmation of Paul in I Corinthians with something akin to disbelief. He says, "Where, O death is your victory? Where, O

death, is your sting?" If we understand death to be an ending then death is victorious. If we see it, as I said last week, as a door for those who die, it can be seen as a victory. Yes, we who remain will feel the pain of loss but the message of victory gives us hope. The sting Paul was talking about was the feeling that there is no hope of reconnection with the one we love. This sting is removed when we believe and our belief gives us that hope of reconnection. We should trust these words for Paul spent many years facing persecution, beatings, shipwrecks and more in being faithful to the Gospel. And yet, he writes this glorious affirmation. He lives with joy even when life is difficult.

So why is it so hard for us to live with such a forward facing belief? Partially because we live with the curse and blessing of technology. Medicine has done so much to extend our lives and to allow us to live with vitality late in life. My great grandfather was written up in the local paper when he turned 90. The article was not just about his long life but how he was still so vital, walking to town each day to get the mail and such. Being 90 was a big deal in and of itself but doing so with vitality was news worthy. Not so much now since many of you have passed that birthday and are still doing well! The newspaper in Sequim would need a full time reporter to talk about what our 90-plus year olds are doing. This is a blessing that we are living longer and healthier.

But that also brings with it challenges. We now assume that we will live long and vital lives. We are disappointed when it doesn't happen. We rely too much on technology. Because fear of diminishment is a greater issue for most of us than dying, it skews our decisions. What I mean is that the pattern until about a generation ago was that you lived life dealing with the aches and pains of life until something happened and then you quickly died. If you graphed it, it was like falling off of a cliff. Now we see it as a gradual decline and fears of nursing homes, dementia, and disability define many of our health care choices. We make medical decisions because we want to stay as vital as we can for as long as we can. We are afraid of diminishment and we haven't thought about death. Then we find out that some of those decisions end up putting us in the places we would never have wanted to be. By prolonging life we have created a situation where we will live in a diminished state, possibly in an institution.

Paul lived life to the fullest but also did not try to hang on tightly to life. He wrote once that if he had his choice he would go to be with Jesus. Life was hard. But then he said, "I will continue to live here to my fullest as long as God wants me to."

Now doctors and life seem to be focused on quantity of days instead of quality of days. We buy into this mindset because we are afraid. We are afraid of the pain of dying, the loss of connection with others we love, missing out on major events, the feeling of loss, the unknown. Perhaps we can even think about more reasons to hang on. A few generations ago it was assumed that few would ever see 70, now we see it as tragic if people don't live at least into their 80's. These assumptions and fears get in the way with our living with joy, even as we age and die. It might even cause us to struggle too hard to live when God is wanting us to let go.

So how do we live with joy in the face of death? Here are just a few thoughts. First, see the blessings in today. When we can live each day to the fullest and focus on the blessings instead of the limitations we can find joy. I have known many a person who was dying who chose to focus on joy. Also, feel the love of God and others. When you know life might be counted in minutes instead of years, dwell on the love you are getting. Realizing how much we are loved, how much God loves us, and how much love we can give helps us face each day with joy.

Now here is a hard one. To live with joy in the face of death we have to quit worrying about tomorrow. So many, at this time of life, get overwrought thinking about their loved ones and what they will do; will they have enough money; will others take care of them like we do; and more. The unbreakable truth is that there is nothing, at this late moment we can do to alter the future. Those who are left are going to be forced to pick up the pieces and move on. Instead of worrying about the what ifs of life, as I said, focus on the joys, the love and trust that others will be there for your loved ones as you have been there for others at their times of loss.

Finally, this is the big one, trust the victory. We are a resurrection people. We believe in eternal life. We believe Romans 8 which says nothing can separate us from the love of God. When we let these truths fill our being we can live with joy.

I have seen this so many times in my ministry. I would like to say that I always see it, but that is not the case. But I see it enough to know you can trust the victory to come and it will give you joy. I think of a Pastor friend who is dying of a hereditary disease. He knows what the future will be like. Amongst its symptoms is the losing of your sight and hearing. A few years ago someone asked him why he still goes to church when he cannot hear the sermons or recognize the people. His friend who was relating it said, "He smiled and said, 'Those things are not what is important. God is there and I go to hang out with God among others who also love him. I also hope, by my presence, that I am sharing that faith matters and the promises of Jesus are true.'"

We need to embrace that we all die and see it not as an aberration but a reality for then we can begin to live and say with Paul, thanks be to God who gives us the victory. As we said, sometimes we may walk through the valley but Paul says it can be a valley filled with light instead of filled with shadows and fear. This is our resurrection faith and what makes our vision different from the Psalmist.