

FACING DEATH

(04/25/10)

Scripture Lesson: 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)

As you may have noted from our newsletter or Sunday bulletin we have just begun a new session of our Thursday evening Spiritual Study and Growth Group. The theme for the next eight weeks will be trying to understand death and life after death from both a Buddhist and a Christian perspective.

I know this doesn't sound like a particularly upbeat theme. There are several reasons, however, why I have selected this topic. First, it fits well with the themes of crucifixion and resurrection that are central to the Lenten and Easter seasons. Second, since many of us have lost loved ones in the recent or distant past, I thought it might be helpful to consider the possibility that they may not be dead, in fact, that there might actually be no death. Third, since many of us are feeling the pain of separation from loved ones who have died, or whom we believe to have died, I thought it might be helpful to consider the possibility that they might not actually be separated from us, that they might be closer to us than we think.

Finally, 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. Actually there are other things that are certain; we talk about these on Sunday morning and we hope to address them in our Spiritual Study and Growth Group.

Many years ago, in his book entitled *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker suggested that 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 it, 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 don't see the advantage to sticking our head in the sand when it comes to death. I would rather we think about it and talk about it. Our advantage is that we can do so from a religious perspective.

This past fall, when our Spiritual Study and Growth Group was discussing the themes raised in William Paul Young's book *The Shack*, several parishioners who were unable to attend the Thursday sessions asked if I could share some of the insights from the book and from our discussions in my Sunday morning sermons. I didn't do this, not because the theme of forgiveness that is central to this book is not important, but because the focus in our worship every fall is almost entirely on stewardship, the Protestant Reformation, Thanksgiving, and Advent. The themes of the book, which I hope to revisit at a later time, just didn't seem to fit. However, the Easter season, the post-Easter period, is an excellent time to reflect on the meaning of death.

The scripture lesson this morning, the anointing of Jesus, appears in three of the four gospels. The passages in Matthew and Mark are practically identical, which shows that Matthew copied the passage from Mark. Luke, for some reason, chose to leave it out. 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 daughter of Lazarus. In Mark the woman anoints Jesus' head; in John she anoints his feet.

These discrepancies apparently did not trouble the persons who compiled the gospels. They did not feel the need to make all 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 the memories of the same incident by several people often differed, it is not surprising that the accounts do not always agree.

At the end of the passage in each of the Gospels, Jesus defends the woman's actions. In 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. Despite Peter's rebuke, Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. 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.

This past week in my Psychology of Religion class at Assumption College, we talked about existentialism. 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 they call the *Umwelt*, the givenness of life and of our life. Existentialists tell us that these conditions, however, are not causes; they do not have the power to define us. They can never separate us from 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.

I gave the class a copy of a cartoon. In the cartoon, a man is standing with his back to the wall, his hands tied behind him. He is facing a firing squad 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 voted for trying to run away. No one wanted to whimper and plead for mercy. 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."

In the cartoon, a small stone is lying at the man's feet. 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.

The students came up with several alternative responses. Several voted for charging at the soldiers. 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 would be transforming himself from a passive victim into one who chooses the moment of his death.

In an effort to move them away from their obsession with the warrior archetype, I made a few 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 tell them I was just kidding, that I 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 could stall them 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.

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 not only at the executioners, who expect us to cower and plead for mercy, we would be poking fun at all those who fear death. We would be poking fun at the many ways we deny or run from death. 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 than my option of faking a sneeze.

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. The question is not entirely hypothetical, for we are all facing a firing squad. We are all facing death. It may come sooner; it may come later; 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.

As we heard this past Mandy Thursday evening during our Tenebrae service, 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. But he does not allow his fear to overwhelm him, to turn him aside from his path.

In existentialist terms, Jesus knows he cannot control the conditions of his life. In fact, he is not particularly interesting in doing this. He will drink from the cup which God or life has handed him. Even on the cross, Jesus cannot be broken. He transcends not only the pain of his body but also the pain that comes when his followers betray, deny, and desert him. Jesus may have been speaking of more than the Roman soldiers when he says, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He may have been referring to his disciples. He may also have been referring to us.

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 some day, a day that may come sooner rather than later, we will no longer exist, it leads to two options. For some people it renders life meaningless. For others, it makes every single moment supremely valuable.

The fear of death is the greatest or ultimate fear. All other fears are derivative. Why else would we be afraid of flying, afraid of the water, afraid of heights? If we identify not only with our body but our self-image, the fear of embarrassment or failure is also grounded in a fear of death. If we can face our death with the response of faith rather than fear, these other fears will simply dissolve.

The fear of all these different kind of 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?

I invite us to face our death, the death of our body, and our many deaths as Jesus did, not with the response of fear but 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 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, they can become a deepening and a freeing experience.

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; 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 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.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
April 25, 2010*