

November 17, 2019

“Finding Trouble: Facing Death Courageously”

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:9 (Psalm 116 quoted in v. 13), Philippians 1:20-26, Psalm 116

This Fall we are Finding Trouble: that is, inviting one another to step into unknown and unsafe territory in which we HAVE to rely on and reach out to God for help, rescue, and strength. We’ve acknowledged this might involve fighting against global slavery, or praying dangerous prayers, or giving generously, or interacting with others in a host of situations: people who don’t know Jesus yet (Sharing Our Faith), or those who are younger than we are (Hanging With Kids), or those who have addictions (Getting Honest About Addictions), or those who are on the ‘other side’ of lines we have drawn (Crossing Barriers). To only risk actions, conversations, and relationships we KNOW we can handle is our default mode. To think and live within understood and manageable realities we can get our heads and hearts around is so much more comfortable. BUT our faith doesn’t grow when we aren’t ‘in over our heads.’ If we always walk around thinking and saying, “I’ve got this,” then we are “walking by sight, and not by faith” (see 2 Corinthians 5:7), which is exactly backwards from what Paul says.

As if everything we’ve talked about already isn’t enough trouble to find so our faith can grow, today we are going to look at Facing Death Courageously – like Jesus, and Paul, and so many others. Just as Janet kew while addressing our addictions last week, I recognize death and dying is particularly sensitive and personal. Many of us live with emotions related to death and dying just below the surface; and that’s where we’d like to keep them. For some, grief and sadness related to loss is buried so deep we don’t even know it’s there. But I want to risk going there with you this morning and – as we say in Emotionally Healthy Spirituality – get out in the open what was previously hidden from us.

Let me make a few clarifications. In our two passages this morning, Paul is admittedly talking about martyrdom – persecution and suffering for his faith. He is not addressing terminal diseases, quality-of-life and end-of-life decisions. Furthermore, some of the practical things I’d like us to consider facing will be difficult to apply to sudden, unexpected, and tragic deaths. Not all deaths should be talked about in the same way. I’m also not sure I want to put the death/potential death of first responders and those in the military into the same conversation – although, in many ways, they courageously accept the fact that they may die on any given day more than most.

This conversation is messy and personal; but – of course – I want it to be biblical too. I want all of us to somehow Face Death Courageously – not only by reading books like *Being Mortal* and offering EHS and Grief Share and “Surviving the Holidays” – but by having our lives and our deaths shaped by the words of scripture. Scriptures like “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1:21) I want us to feel and demonstrate that “We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, [because we know] our inner nature is being renewed

day by day.” (2 Corinthians 4:16) I want us to be honest that “In this tent we groan” (2 Corinthians 5:2) – never minimizing the pain and hurt that comes from the fact that we are “wasting away.” At the same time, I want us to be “always confident” (2 Corinthians 5:6) What would it take to live like this?

First off – and this takes courage – we have to, like Paul, face our mortality. Paul knew that the Romans could end his life at any moment. But even before he was imprisoned, Paul knew that all of life is fleeting. The Hebrew scriptures he was steeped in, long before he met Christ on the Damascus Road, were as down-to-earth and honest as you could get anywhere in the Ancient Near East. Many of the Psalms acknowledged the reality of death – including the Psalm he quotes here in 2 Corinthians. [Psalm 116:10 is repeated in 2 Corinthians 4:13] The Old Testament is full of honest and angry laments. Death was the enemy that kept winning. And nowhere in the Old Testament is that reality minimized or spun into some pie-in-the-sky cliché. You would have to look hard for any denial of death from Genesis through Revelation.

And yet those of us who claim these same scriptures as authoritative, have a hard time facing our mortality – especially when in our “wasting away” we are surrounded by amazing machines, game-changing medicine, anti-aging creams, and plastic surgery. In so many ways we keep trying to disconnect from death, distract ourselves from what we all must face, and distance ourselves from honest and hard conversations. All because death is too painful.

But Eugene Peterson reminds us, “Pain isn’t the worst thing. Being hated isn’t the worst thing. Being separated from the one you love isn’t the worst thing. Death isn’t the worst thing. The worst thing is failing to deal with reality and becoming disconnected from what is actual . . . What I do with my grief affects the way you handle your grief; together, we form a community that deals with death and other loss in the context of God’s sovereignty . . . We don’t become mature human beings by getting lucky and circumventing loss, and certainly not by avoidance and distraction. Learn to lament . . . We’re mortals, after all. We and everyone around are scheduled for death (mortis).” (Eugene Peterson in *Leap Over A Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*) We need to face our mortality. And that takes courage.

Secondly, we have to believe that – in the midst of the many deaths which surround us – there’s something we can’t yet see that “far outweighs them all” or is “beyond all measure.” (2 Corinthians 4:17) This is where hope comes in. Somehow, without glossing over the real suffering and pain which death and dying create, God calls us to look with the eyes of faith to what He has promised to clothe us with after the “earthly tent we live in is destroyed.” (2 Corinthians 5:1) But how often do we keep trying to prop up our tents with possessions and accomplishments and beauty products? How often do we entertain ourselves and self-medicate ourselves and distract ourselves from the finiteness of our tents and neglect nurturing the deep hope that comes through intimacy with Christ – the One who is the author of hope in the face of death itself?

One exercise that might help increase your hopefulness and faith in what lies ahead is to first admit that it's actually hard for us to agree with Paul that "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21) When life here is good, or it seems like there's so much more to look forward to, maybe we don't feel like Paul at all. I'll go first and say it: 'I want to be here for a lot longer.' And I need to keep talking to God about that, looking at His word, and asking Him to help me discover what's going on inside of me. One possibility in inviting God to help me look below the surface on this topic, is to ask myself, "Do I really believe God will come through for me after my life is over? Is He really true to His promises? Can I trust God with my family if I were to die?" I don't want to scare you into thinking your pastor is having a faith crisis, I just think we should all be more honest about what might be down deep when it comes to that which, "can't be seen [and] is eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:18)

What I think Paul is modeling here is an **Honest Hopefulness** which refuses to minimize either pain and loss OR God's promise of a glorious future. Honest Hopefulness.

What would that look like for us? Practically? Today?

How I'm going to answer that question is not in the text. But this is what I think Paul would say to people like us in 21st century America; people who will probably not be martyred for our faith; people who live in a time when medical technology can do amazing things (and is almost god-like); and yet people like Paul who still face the enemy of death. I think Paul would say that, by God's grace, we can actually face death, like he did, with honesty and hope.

So this is what I would like to say pastorally after watching more than 250 families face death. Layered on top of those experiences are the loss of my father as a teenager, and Shelly and my loss of an infant daughter more than 20 years ago.

1) [This first suggestion is not for those who have faced/will face sudden and unexpected death.] **Know when to fight and know when to face reality** so that – if you are given the gift of time – you can have awesome conversations with your family and friends. You can keep praying and if you get healed/cured that is a bonus! I used to use Skip Hughes as my example for what it can be like when we Face Death Courageously. Skip fought cancer for a while but then decided to stop fighting the disease, and start fighting even harder for the hearts of his family. But I have more than Skip to use as an example. In the last twelve months I have seen others Face Death Courageously: Bob Funk, Jenny Hoesel, Lois Lampert, Mary Alice Ives, and Charlie Trussell. They fought, and then they Faced Death Courageously. (Psalm 116:15 says "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His faithful ones." It can also be a precious gift to us.)

2) **Take care of your "tent" without worshipping it** – or the miracle of medicine. I am not saying to be fatalistic and unhealthy. I'm not saying anyone should get to 80 and quit caring. I am saying that medicine can become an idol that we worship at all costs. There is no template for this, but there is a way to pursue good health without worshipping it or denying that our

bodies are “wasting away.” Can I recommend humor when and where appropriate? [Please make sure you joke about your own tent and not someone else’s.]

3) **Plan your funeral.** Create and update your will. Make your directives clear. Please have a funeral. Everyone left behind will be glad you did. Have honest conversations along the way. Parents: go to and take your kids to funerals.

4) (SLIDE) **Make Jesus the focus of your living and your dying.** Keep your eyes on Him. Be fearless BUT don’t be afraid to admit when you’re scared or losing hope. Sometimes saying that out loud robs death of power.

The Heidelberg Catechism was written by two Dutchmen in the 1560’s. [Q & A format]
Question #1 is “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The answer is, “That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.”

What is your only comfort in life and in death? What if Jesus isn’t our only comfort in life and in death? What if our family is? Or our success, or possessions, or our good health? Will we ever be able to Face Death Courageously in a culture – even a Church culture – that can be full of denial and fearful? Will we ever be able to Face Death Courageously in our own strength? No! We’ll find ourselves “in over our head” every time death comes knocking at our door; but that’s the perfect time to cry out to God for help.

We can’t Face Death Courageously without the “Death-Defying Rescue” of Christ. Jesus was perfectly fine living forever with the Father and the Spirit in Trinitarian bliss; but He chose to leave eternity and enter our finite and death-infused world. And He was honest and hopeful; honest that He didn’t feel good about dying and hopeful that His Father would come through for Him.

Luke’s Gospel tells us that “He set His face to Jerusalem” – knowing His accusers were waiting. Was it easy? His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His arrest and execution make it clear He was terrified and in agony. But He got up and dealt death an eternal blow . . . by dying . . . not running from it. Let’s not run from it either. Let’s go looking for some more trouble. Let’s Face Death Courageously . . . together.