

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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Rev. John F. Koerner

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 N.R.S.V.)

Good Grief

There is a story about two brothers who were very wealthy. They were not nice people and were generally disliked by the community. When the older brother, John died, the younger brother Tom came to see the pastor. Tom said, "Pastor, I know that my brother could be a difficult man to deal with and many people don't like him. Still he was my brother and I loved him. I would like you to do the funeral service." The pastor agreed. Then Tom added, "And I'd like for you to tell people that my brother was a saint."

The pastor hesitated, so Tom said, "You don't have to answer right now. But listen, if you will say that my brother was a saint, I'll donate \$20,000 to the church for that new roof you all need so badly."

The day of the funeral service came and the pastor had a few words to say about John. He said, "You all know that John was a difficult man. He lied and cheated and defrauded lots of people in this town. But compared to his brother, the man was a saint."

Our lesson for today deals not so much with funerals, but with grief and hope. The author of I Thessalonians writes to the early church, many of whom were new Christians, and he says, "I do not want you to be uninformed about those (Christians) who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

The scripture does not say that Christians do not grieve. Instead it says that we grieve differently than those who do not know Christ. Our grieving is different because we have the sure and certain hope of Christ Jesus with us throughout our lives, because we know that the grave is not the end, that in Christ we shall know resurrection and life eternal with God.

As Christians we are not terrorized by death. Because Christ has broken the power of death, we need not live in constant fear and terror of death. That makes us different.

I want to talk about how we as Christians deal with death by living well, dying well, and grieving

well.

Christians deal with death first of all by living well. We know that physical death is a part of life. We all face physical death. We are all dying every day. This is a reality that in Christ, we feel no need to deny.

Because we know that we have a limited time, we are motivated to use the time we have well. We are assured that Christ walks with us every day of our lives. We strive to live lives worthy of him each day. We may still have regrets when we get to the end of our earthly lives. But we will have far fewer regrets for having lived in Christ. For the more Christ lives in us and we live in him, the more we are part of something much greater than ourselves. Our earthly lives will end, but the kingdom of God will continue on. Our acts of kindness and love will live on in others too.

The more freely we give ourselves to Christ, the less we fear physical death. Paul writes in Romans 14:7-8, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

The converse can also be said, the more afraid we are of dying the more twisted and selfish our lives become. Those who are afraid to die are also afraid to live. At least, they are afraid to live well and lovingly. Jesus said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" (Matthew 16:25-26)

Because we are not terrorized by death, we can live well. And because we are not terrorized by death we can die well.

Dying well means that we do not waste time or energy on pretending we or someone we love is not dying. It is one thing to fight hard to live. It is quite another thing to pretend someone who is dying is not in fact dying.

Families often refuse to talk about the fact that someone is dying, especially with the one who is dying. They often say things like, "We haven't told Dad that he is dying. He doesn't know." Families do this because they believe that they are protecting their loved one this way.

Most of the time, however, the person who is dying is quite aware of that fact. This isn't really something that you can hide from someone. Their body is sending them the message loud and clear.

Strangely enough, the person who is dying is often also reluctant to talk about the fact that they are dying. They often refuse to talk about it because they think they are protecting their families from hurt. But of course, the families do know. They just aren't talking about it.

The result of all this denial and pretending is missed opportunity. Hospice has been very good at encouraging families and those who are dying to talk to each other about what is going on, to not waste the precious time that is left on pretense and denial.

I remember one older lady telling me how much she treasured the time she had with her husband when he was sick with cancer. Someone had commented that they hated to see people linger when they were dying. This lady said that she didn't feel that way at all. She said that before her husband got sick, they were both so busy they scarcely spent time together at all. But after he got sick, they were able to spend a lot of time together. She said, "I didn't want him to be sick or in pain, but I wouldn't trade that time with him for anything."

Guideposts Magazine had a story about a young mother who was dying from terminal cancer who also used her time well. Her husband and her had three young daughters. Instead of giving in to the pain and sadness, the mother worked with her husband to make recordings for each of her daughters for all the special times in their lives. She made a list of all the milestones in her daughters' lives, like their first day of school or their high school graduation. And she recorded family stories, motherly advice and encouragement for her daughters to face each of these important events with faith and hope.

On her last day, this mother recorded her final tape. She began with these words, "Ruthie, Hannah, Molly - this is the most important tape. Someday your daddy will bring home a new mommy. Please make her feel special. Show her how to take care of you." She shared a few more words then ended the tape with this: "It's okay to be sad, sweeties, Jesus cried too. He knows about sadness and will help you to be happy again. Remember, I'll always love you." ("The Last Tape" by Nan Pinkston, Guideposts, True Inspirational Stories: 10 Real Life Stories of Hope and Faith.)

That bit about Jesus cried too, brings me to my third point. Christians know how to live well, die well, and grieve well. Christians do grieve, we simply grieve differently than those who have no hope.

When Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus had died, he wept. We draw strength from that story because we know that God is with us in our grief and loss. God is not somewhere off in heaven, cold and aloof. God shares our pains and our sorrow.

It helps us to know that our loved ones will be caught up in God's loving arms and that they will be forever beyond pain, and sickness, and death. And it helps us to know that we will someday see our loved ones again.

Still, our sense of loss and pain is very real. When we lose a loved one to death, we suffer the loss not only of that relationship, but also of all the hopes and dreams that we shared with them. Physical death is still a loss.

It is always hard to lose a loved one, but the loss seems so much greater in a young person. My mother died when she was only 44 years old. She had six children. She only got to see one of us get married. And she never got a chance meet or hold any of her 12 grandchildren. Which

is a shame because my mom loved children so much. I still miss my mom so much!

So here's the thing about grief and loss. When we try to ignore it or deny it, it gains more power over us, not less. Some people break down and cry a lot at the funeral and days that follow, others deal with the loss by keeping busy. Some people grieve in public, others grieve in private.

There is no right way or wrong way to grieve. At the same time, we might do well to follow the example of Jesus who was not afraid to cry. The loss is real and we need to find a way to express that, to keep it from building up inside us and overwhelming us.

Grieving well, means not having to pretend. It hurts and we will need to heal. Grieving well means not having to do this all ourselves, we can fall back upon God. And grieving well means remembering that the grave is not the end. Though we grieve, all is not lost and never will be. For we are in Christ. And Christ is eternal.

I want to close by reading this passage again, this time from Eugene Peterson's translation, The Message: **And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don't want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus.**

And then this: We can tell you with complete confidence - we have the Master's word on it - that when the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still live will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they'll be ahead of us. The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God's trumpet blast! He'll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise - they'll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the clouds to meet the Master. Oh, we'll be walking on air! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master. So reassure one another with these words.

Amen.