

Memorize & Ponder

**Brentwood Presbyterian Church
October 6, 2013 – The Lord's Supper**

Facing Death

**Romans 8:38-39 & Ps 37:1-9
(675, 422, 530, 556)**

Death comes to us all.
It is a fact of life,
mysterious, infuriating, and inevitable.

It always causes pain,
of the body leading up to death,
of the emotions confronting death,
of the intellect trying to make sense of death,
and of the spirit dealing with the mysteries of the transition.

There is pain for the person dying,
for those who love them,
and for those whose lives are seemingly emptied by their passing.

Facing death,
we often helpless, and hopeless, and alone.

I've been thinking this week about the systems of support
that we have developed in our Western society
to deal with the reality of death.

They are largely offered and controlled by the health system.
They are often staffed by very capable and compassionate
professionals in the process of dying.

We've mastered countless ways of alleviating pain
and making the dying patient comfortable in their passing.

Several things have struck me about these developments,
random considerations that I am still sorting through.

First, there is an inherent contradiction
in a health system dealing with dying.
It's whole reason for being is to sustain and enhance a healthy life.
Death is the ultimate defeat for the system.
It is the enemy against which the whole system fights.
For example, we "battle" cancer; we "fight off" diseases;
we "lose" when we die.
That pervasive public attitude makes it difficult
to face death positively, constructively, and compassionately.

Second, we hide death.
We put, most often, into institutions.
We surround it by high-cost technology and well-trained professionals.

Third, we have not prepared well for facing death –
that of our grandparents, parents, relatives, friends,
children, and ourselves.

Be honest, how much time do you spend
thinking and feeling about your own death
and the deaths of those close to you
before you are confronted with a terminal illness
or death itself.

Lots of other observations and thoughts
flitted through my mind this week,
but those are the ones that took the clearest form.

At this point, what has been clarified for me
is that we need to face death differently –
with greater openness, acceptance, and preparation.

I think that different way is offered by the Christian faith.

Paul probably confronted the prospect of death
more often than most of us.
He dealt in death as a persecutor of the early Christians.
When he came to see things differently
through his encounter with the living Christ,
he began a dedicated witness to the Gospel.

Witnessing to the Gospel in his world was risky business.
He was belittled, berated, and beaten.
On top of all of this, he suffered from a serious debilitating illness.
In the end, according to tradition, he was executed in Rome.

Facing death, Paul refused to give in
to all the natural fears he must have felt.
Instead, he stood firmly in his confidence in God's love,
revealed in his relationship with Jesus Christ.
Nothing in all creation,
Paul witnessed to the Christians living in the very heart of imperial power,
can separate us from God's saving love.

That guarantees us an eternal life
in the divine community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
together with all the saints.

That divine community, headed by Jesus Christ,
both invites and gathers with us
around this communion table this morning.

When I was growing up,
we always sang Horatius Bonar's communion hymn,
'Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face,' (BP #543)
3 verses before communion and 4 verses after.
Here's the last verse:

*Feast after feast thus comes and passes by,
yet, passing, points to the glad feast above,
giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy,
the Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love.*

If we were more often open to the grace
that allowed us to see death
as an entry into God's bright banquet hall,
as our transition to that glad feast
of the Holy Trinity with all the saints,
then we might find a confidence and wisdom
that allowed us to face death with greater hope and courage.

We spoke about death at our Bible Study on Friday,
exploring how we saw it and how we faced it.
I want to share three insights from that conversation.

First, we saw death as the end of pain,
a peaceful passage to a happier place.
It's just a year since Clarence Wells died.

Clarence is Terry's husband.
She spoke of how peaceful and happy he was
in his last minutes.

She believes he knew he was being welcomed
into that heavenly community of feasting, dancing, and joy,
with a vintage Mustang convertible and a beautiful garden!

Second, this kind of faith,
the kind of confidence Paul shared in our text this morning,
gives you resilience in walking through the process of dying,
whether it's your own death or someone else's.

It's a strength that sees things differently.
Death is not the end, or a defeat,
but as a transition to a closer relationship with God,
the true source of eternal flourishing and joy.

Third, we thought that a way to open up
conversations about this different way of facing death
with our children and grandchildren
is to talk with them about what we wanted to see happen at our funerals
and why each of those elements had meaning for us.

Christians face death differently.
This sermon has just scratched the surface of how.
I trust we will find opportunities for more conversations about this
as we nourish people to flourish in every phase of life
in the grace of Jesus Christ.

*May God fill you with love, aspiration, and faith this week
as you go forth to bless the world.*