
Every Day, Give Something Away

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Proper 24 – Year B

The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” Job 38:1

Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.” Mark 10:43

Recently, there was a church Bible study group discussing the tragic possibility of sudden death. The leader said, “You know, we will all die some day; and none of us really knows when. But if we did know, wouldn’t we all do a better job of preparing ourselves?” Everybody nodded their heads in agreement with this comment.

So he continued, “What would you do if you knew you only had four weeks of life remaining before your death, before your Great Judgment Day?” One guy said, “For those four weeks, I would go out into my community and preach the Gospel to those that have not yet accepted Jesus into their lives.” “A very admirable thing to do,” said the group leader. A lady then said, “For me during those four weeks, I would dedicate all of my remaining time to serving my family, my church, and my world with a greater conviction.” “That’s wonderful!” the group leader commented.

Then, one guy in the back finally spoke up loudly. “For those four weeks, I would travel throughout the whole United States with my mother-in-law in a little Ford Escort, and we would stay in a Motel 6 every night.”

Everybody was puzzled by his answer. “Why would you do that?” the group leader asked. The man smiled, “Because ... it would be the longest four weeks of my life!”

My apologies to mothers-in-law! Despite that humor of that joke, the subject of my sermon this morning is serious. Why do people die? What is the wise way to deal with death?

Some scholars believe that death is the original philosophical question. Maybe it is the question that began human consciousness. Maybe what makes us distinctly human is that we are somehow able to reflect upon what death means. We may not have answers to the question, but we sure do think about it.

I certainly remember when I began to think about death. Sometimes I think that the deaths I experienced as child were what prompted me to consider spirituality, and to consider being a priest. When I was quite young, one of my early friends died of a brain tumor; then my aunt died of cancer. By the time I was fifteen years old, three of my childhood friends had died, one of leukemia, two of asthma. Then, another two died in automobile accidents. There were no easy answers to those tragedies.

And my life is not unusual that way. Each of us here this morning has experienced some sort of death. Some of you have lived through the death of your own spouses, or dear children, or certainly parents. Great people have died.

There are no easy answers to untimely death. But that does not stop us from trying to speak about death. Thus it has been, and thus it will always be. No matter what century we live in, it is our spiritual community that has offered us some reflection about death or suffering; and great pieces of literature have been generated.

So it is that one of the greatest books of Judaism and Christianity is about suffering and death. It is the biblical book of Job, the patient and innocent and faithful man of God, who was nevertheless struck with all manner of suffering. It was his plight to suffer by experiencing the death of those closest to him: his family. The Book of Job is long and painful. Job cries out with lament, and his suffering is made even more intense by the empty consolation offered by his friends. His friends mean well, but they are unable to adequately explain, unable to accurately justify, Job's suffering.

Publicly, Job defends God with great valor, but internally he asks God the unanswerable questions about death. Finally, God does speak to Job, and to us, with those mighty words: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" "What do you know?"

Whatever the story, the word is that we will never know. Death is an irrational and illogical, non-solvable fact of life. We will die, all of us will die; and we can do little about its timing or circumstances.

The unknowability of death is what drives us to reflection and philosophy. It is what drives us to religion and spirituality, to the realizations of a higher power, a power that might be larger and stronger even than death. In our Bible, the books of Ecclesiastes and Job and Proverbs make up the so-called wisdom literature; they are ways that bright and thoughtful people have sought to explain the unexplainable features of the world. And they do a good job. This portion of Psalm 104 which is part of our lectionary today has features similar to the wisdom literature of ancient Egyptian culture. The story of Job is one of the universal stories of humanity, no matter what our religion.

For Christians, however, the story of Job is not the last word. Job is a powerful and serious story; but, for Christians, the story of Job is completed in the story of Jesus Christ. For the story of Jesus is really another version of the story of Job. Jesus, too, is the innocent victim. Jesus encounters unjustified suffering. Jesus is misunderstood by his friends. And finally, contrary to Job, Jesus actually dies himself.

The life of Jesus does offer us a way to deal with death. It is not an easy way, but it is the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is to live through death and not to avoid it. The avoidance of death, acting as if death does not exist, makes people act unrealistically in other parts of their life. It is our absurd attempt to avoid death that creates much unreality and anxiety in our lives. Ernst Becker investigated this anxiety in his great book, *The Denial of Death*. Jesus, at a minimum, teaches us to face death, to be realistic about death.

But the gospel this morning offers us another way, a graceful way, to deal with death. We have heard the story before, another account of the disciples of Jesus arguing among themselves about who is the greatest, who would sit next to Jesus in glory. This time, the incident provokes Jesus to offer some words about service. "The person who would be greatest among you is the one who serves," says Jesus.

"The person who would be greatest among you is the one who serves." These are powerful words about how to live. However, this morning, I want to offer those words to us as a way to deal with death. The one who is greatest is the one who knows how to deal with death; and the way to deal with death is to learn how to serve.

Death, after all, is about loss. Death is another term for loss. In death we lose something we cherish, maybe our father or mother, our husband or wife, or child, or brother or sister or best friend. Finally, in death we lose our very own life. Death is about loss.

In a mysterious way, there is a connection between loss and service. Jesus invites his followers to be servants, because, when we serve others, we are giving something away. Indeed, we are losing something. The more we serve, the more we learn to lose things. We might lose our priority in things, we might lose our place in line, we might lose the best seats in the house—to sit at the right hand of the place of honor—we might lose the piece of pie we were saving for ourselves. When we serve, we learn to lose things.

I submit to you this principle: the way to prepare for death is to learn how to lose things. To make a habit of giving things away. I believe, ultimately, that this is the lesson Jesus teaches us about death itself. If death is about loss, the ultimate loss, then the best way we can prepare for death is by learning to lose things. Maybe we should learn to lose something every day. Maybe I should say it this way: "Every day, give something away."

Yes, the great literature of the world is about the unexplainable mystery of death. What happens when we die is

unanswerable this side of the event. In the midst of death and in the midst of loss, Jesus says that the greatest among us will be the ones who serve. We learn, over and over again, and day by day, that when we serve, we lose something. Yes, we learn to lose things. But we gain our soul; we gain glory. We gain eternal life!

AMEN.

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