
Death is Not Failure

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by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, *Dean of the Cathedral*
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As a priest, I have been honored to watch over lots of births. I mean natural human births and baptisms, but I also mean the births of projects, and ministries, and events. Those events are thrilling and hopeful. They keep us alive!

But, it has also been my honor to watch over lots of deaths. In the same way, I mean natural human deaths and funerals, and I also mean the deaths of projects, and ministries, and events. Fantastic ministries are born, they thrive, and then they grow smaller and less intense. They begin a process of dying.

The process of dying is not always a bad thing. Indeed, every living thing has a life cycle. I would even say that the main way we know something is alive, is if we know that one day it will die. The real sign of life is death. The real sign of life is the potential, and the inevitability, of death. Death, then, is not failure; it is the process of life.

So, as church ministries and organizations begin inevitably to fade from their one time glories, I often remind us, in the church, that this witness is why we exist. We exist to witness to death and new life. We are here to recognize and acknowledge death, not to avoid it or explain it away. We are here to somehow recognize the holiness and depth of it. Death puts us in touch with mystery, an ultimate mystery; and that mystery can be the beginning of new life. So it is that we, in the church, are not afraid to touch death. It is our sacred role to touch death with love, to touch death with blessing.

It is not pleasant when death shows up unexpectedly or suddenly. Death can be rude and interruptive. But, maybe more often, death gives most of us some warning. It lets us know that it is coming, around the next bend, or maybe the one after that.

Yes, I am speaking of organizations and institutions; but I am also speaking of our own, personal deaths. And I am speaking of how we deal with death. On any given day, most of us know someone who is dying, or, maybe, someone who has just begun to be in touch with death. Sometimes, we don't know what to say to people who are dying. Sometimes we fear failure. Sometimes, our own fear of death keeps us from saying anything at all.

But it is okay to not know what to say. If we knew what to say, it would be evidence that we really do not understand the mystery. However, my usual advice to us is to say something, anyway. Not something that tries to explain away the mystery. But, say something that is simply about life. Talk about what you saw today. Talk about flowers and children and wildlife and stars. Talk about someone you like, or even love. Talk about life.

Death is not failure. It is part of the mystery of life. If we can touch birth and baptism with love and holiness, we can also touch death with love and holiness. Those loving touches are part the mystery of life.

I close with a special offering, one of my favorite cartoons. It was written and drawn by that great theologian, Charles Schulz, in the comic strip, *Peanuts*. In one panel only, we see Charlie Brown sitting on a dock with Snoopy, gazing at a pretty lake and a blue sky. Charlie Brown sighs and says, "Some day we will all die, Snoopy." Snoopy the realist replies, "True, but on all the other days, we will not."



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