

Isaiah 25: 6 – 9
Revelation 21: 1 – 6a
John 11: 32 – 44
All Saint's Sunday

The Rev. Dr. Dennis S. Tierney
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church
Bainbridge Island, Washington
November 1, 2015

“Being Mortal”

I recently read Atul Gawande's best-selling book, “Being Mortal.” It is a thoughtful, well-written examination of the challenges that face modern societies over aging and death. It is written from a scientific perspective and focuses mostly on the aging and dying parts of life. At the end, Gawande tells of following his father's last wishes by taking his father's ashes back to India to be scattered on the sacred Ganges River. As a dutiful son, though not apparently a believer, Gawande follows the proscribed rituals, including taking three sips of water from the Ganges. Being a western-trained doctor, Gawande prepares for this by taking a boat-load of antibiotics but still gets sick afterwards. But he fulfills his father's final wishes.

One of his recurrent themes is our modern notion that death is a problem to be solved; not a part of life at all. We have marginalized death, narrowed death's options, fought death, and even denied that death will happen for us. We act as if death was somehow optional for those of us with enough money or health insurance. We spend the majority of our health dollars on the last months of physical life. We try all sorts of remedies to prolong physical life even at the expense of human dignity and any measure of quality or joy of the life we are desperately trying to extend. And who could really blame us? Accepting death seems somehow un-American. If we really tried, we could eliminate death, right? We have extended life expectancy, we read that 80 is the new 70, we read about life-extending creams and ointments, new ways to remain young forever. We do all these things and then we pause and remember all those who have died on this one Sunday, All Saints Sunday. As Christians, we both engage in our battles to stave off death and yet we state, quite clearly, that we believe death is not final; we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life to come.

Still, the story of Lazarus can be hard for us to hear. For some, it brings up losses in our lives and we identify strongly with Mary and her reproach of Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” How many times have we heard or made a similar lament – where was God when this happened? For others, this story is about overwhelming human emotions – almost everyone in the story is weeping which, for some of us, is unseemly – to weep openly in front of others. It is one of two times that Jesus weeps in the Gospels. For some, this open challenge to Jesus' ministry parallels the other challenges to his power and authority as a prophet, a healer, and a possible Messiah. This is not the only time some in the crowds wanted proof of His power. Since death is the great disrupter and divider of human life, surely Jesus, if He is who some say He is, could turn back even death. For some, those who have been called to ministry, we sense the failure to minister properly embedded in that moment when Jesus arrives so terribly late. For some, this story is a foretaste of the great resurrection to come on Easter morning. And for most of us, the finality of death – as Martha notes, the inescapable reality of physical decay, seems unassailable even by Jesus.

As the poet Mary Oliver wrote, “If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?” By the time we are adults, we know all too well that there is pain and logic in the world. And sometimes, it feels like there is not much else. We can become overcome by the difficulties and challenges of life. It can seem all too much for us and so why would we want to live with only pain and logic. But, the message of God’s abundant love and blessing is that the world is far, far from only pain and logic. There is much love and mystery in the world, indeed, the Good News of God in Christ is that love and mystery trumps pain and logic. “For every morning, every morning the world is created, created again for us. Each pond with its lilies and frogs is a prayer heard and answered lavishly, every morning. Whether or not we have ever dared to be happy, whether or not we have ever dared to pray.”

So, there is our first human conundrum. We actually live simultaneously in life and death even though we think about these two concepts as diametrically opposed. For every day is both beginning and ending. We live with loss and gain at the same time. I am reminded that Aloha can mean both hello and good-bye. Indeed, good-bye is a contraction of “God be with you” and farewell really does mean that we should go well into our unknown future. Sleep has been called, “the little death” and our culture reminds us of all the ways that we experience forms of death. When relationships are broken, we die to one another. In my own family, relatives spent years refusing any contact with one another – they were dead to each other. As we age, we lose abilities of all kinds. The scientific findings are terrifying in some ways – being over the age of 50 sounds like a downhill journey of increasing loss until the final collapse – no wonder we sell so many drugs to stave off this series of minor deaths. But at the same moment, we know that new opportunities come, new gifts are revealed, new relationships flourish, and joy can come into our lives unexpected and unbidden. Our best moments of life are not always in our past.

A second conundrum, one we face as Christians, is that we have seemingly traded off a miserable life here on earth for a joyous life in heaven. This theme of suffering now but feasting after appears in Jewish Scripture and reaches its peak in medieval Christian times – accelerated, according to some scholars, by the astonishing death rates during the 12th and 13th centuries plagues that devastated Europe. As Hobbes put it, life was nasty, brutish, and short. Heaven was the goal and the only place where peace, prosperity, and justice occurred, but you had to die to obtain any of it. And for most of us, there was the small matter of centuries in Purgatory – few got right through the pearly gates.

At the very end of our Gospel story, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead and then commands the amazed watchers to “unbind him and let him go.” That is more than a command to those who were present. That is a command to us today. We are to unbind our disbelief, unbind our fears, unbind our hurts, unbind our arrogance, unbind our selfishness, unbind all the things and feelings that cripple us and keep us from the love of one another and the love of God right here on earth.

When we tell the stories of the saints of our lives – all those people who helped us and formed us by their actions, by their beliefs, by the very fabric of their lives, we unbind them and we unbind ourselves. By claiming them all over again, in our memories and in our hearts, they are set free to live again in our lives. And we are set free of the paralyzing fears that prevent us from living strong and true in this world regardless of the inevitability of our physical death. Through our God-given ability to recall, to remember, to reflect, and to react, we unbind the fetters of death

and make ourselves new once again. In so doing the end becomes the beginning and God is with us in all that we do.

Write these words on our hearts and minds for these words are trustworthy and true, death is not final, physical death is not the end. We are changed for we are unbound and we are set free. That is true for those who have died and it is true for us the living. In God's love, we can all be unbound from the things that separate us and be joined together in Christ.

So, tell stories of loved ones at least this day, raise a glass to them, remember them, and make them alive again in our hearts and minds. Pay forward all that they have done for us so that we might give as we have received. Roll back the stone of despair. Unbind them from the fetters of death and, for ourselves, cast off the winding cloths of fear and anxiety and hopelessness. When we do, all of creation, in this world and the next, will step forward into the light of God's love and be together at the great feast on the mountain. Amen.