

orphans and the needy and the wayfarer, and to those who ask, and who set slaves free.”

Scripture and Readings:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to God, and if we die, we die to God; so then, whether we live or die, we are God’s.”

~ *Romans 14: 7 – 8*

The Moon spoke: “You who are people, you should when you died, rise again, you should not altogether die. For I, when I am dead, I again living return. I intended that you people should also resemble me and do the things that I do. I, the Moon, do not altogether dying go away; I rise again. ~ from *“The Origin of Death”* by the extinct /Xam people of southern Africa, in *Parabola*, Summer, 2010

End of life issues are part of our faith and part of our practice. We are called to empower those we love and those we serve, which includes the resources they need to live and to die. It is part of the covenant we have with one another, to be with one another in the good times and in the hard times. ~ *Clergy Guide to End-of-Life Issues*, by Martha Jacobs

Sermon - I was a very lucky grandchild. Growing up, I lived near all of my grandparents and saw them often. All four of my grandparents attended my wedding – and all four were relatively healthy and living independently at that time. I was 29 years old when the first of my grandparents died and 35 when the last died.

By contrast, my children were 7 and 10 when Larry’s father John died of cancer which had abruptly metastasized after being in remission for four and a half years. We were here in Gainesville; Larry’s parents were in Pennsylvania. It was July, and we had planned on spending two weeks of our vacation with them at the end of the month. Though we talked with Larry’s parents by phone regularly, I was unaware of how serious things had become until we got a sudden call on July 16 from Larry’s sister, saying that we needed to get there as quickly as possible. We frantically packed up the kids and the car and left early in the morning on the 17th, drove almost 24 hours straight through, only to find on our arrival that John was already in a coma from which he never awakened. He died on July 19. The minister of his church was away on vacation; Larry organized the memorial service. John was a caring articulate man of faith, who had talked openly about his cancer, so we had a good sense of what he wanted for this service, including his cremation. John left a viable will. What none of us knew were all the details that arose in the following weeks: insurance policies, death benefits, pension plan disputes, and finances. Larry’s mother had never written a check. John – and we - had never talked much about all the details we might need to know when he died.

Six years later my father Alvin died. Two years before, he had contracted a strange auto-immune disease called Wegener’s, which attacked his soft palate tissue and lungs, and, before it was diagnosed, destroyed his kidney function. His condition stabilized with the right chemo drugs and dialysis, and life went on as my parents moved into their new house for my dad’s pending retirement. A year after their move, three days before Larry and I were supposed to drive up to see my parents, I talked with my dad on the phone and said, as I was hanging up, “I love you.” The next day my mother called to tell me

that my father had just collapsed and died, as he walked from the bathroom to their bedroom. Larry and I packed up the kids and the car and drove straight through to Annapolis. By the time we got there, his body had been cremated. Since his memorial service was at the Lutheran church where I grew up, and since Lutheran services have well-ordered liturgy, we didn't need to do much planning, except to request "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" as the closing hymn. My dad left a viable will, but I knew very little about the rest of his affairs: his retirement agreement with his company, insurance, health insurance, mortgage, death benefits, finances. My mother coped as well as anyone could, but she was in shock. She knew nothing of their finances and she also had never written a check in her life. The next weeks were a nightmare for me, as I tried to find documents, pay off bills and credit cards, transfer things to my mother's name, and deal with his business partnership. As a family, we had never talked about death or all the things we might need to know when my father died.

Ten years later Larry's mother Alberta died. She had driven down from Pennsylvania that January to spend six weeks with us. She began to have episodes of stumbling, her legs not working quite right, her back hurting. Ultimately, she was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease and then abdominal cancer. Alberta never got to go back her home. She died in our home in April, articulate about her faith and her vision that she would see John and her mother in heaven. So we knew the kind of memorial service she wanted; her church was very helpful and supportive. And she had an up-to-date viable will. Yet because she had no idea when she left her farm that she would never return, the next months were a marathon of things to do. In addition to the ins and outs of the finances and insurance, we had a large three and a half story house, a huge barn, a milk house, a springhouse and a carriage house to clean out – and believe me, all manner of things had accumulated there in layers. Over the years, we had asked her if we could help her sort through any of these buildings, and Alberta always replied, "Oh, I'm just leaving all these things for you to deal with after I die" – and so she did.

You hear the common themes in these three experiences: the regret I have for the things we never talked about with our parents and the reality that life – and death – happen to us while we are making other plans. Martha Jacobs, in her book [A Clergy Guide to End-of-Life Issues](#), sounds an imperative call to clergy to speak of death and end-of-life issues in the midst of congregational life and worship, not simply at memorial services. Jacobs challenges pastors to cut through the silence to empower and assist our congregations with the resources they need to die as well as to live. She quotes William Sloane Coffin who says that ministers must begin by claiming their own discomfort and normalizing the subject of death.

So here I am, with you, my dearly loved congregation, knowing that we need to have this talk, claiming my own discomfort, and realizing that I need to have this talk with my own sons as well. And, if this topic seems kind of far-off to you because you are in your twenties or thirties, let me remind you of two things: the first is that Terri Schiavo was in her thirties when she entered a comatose state that lasted seven years and resulted in a legal battle between her husband and her parents because she did not have an advance directive or a health care surrogate; and second, as younger adults, you may be just the person who needs to initiate a conversation with your parents.

Let me tell you what I have already done: I have an up-to-date will with an executor. I have a durable power of attorney, which gives my designated person the ability to make legal decisions and take action when I die or if I am incapacitated. I have a health care surrogate, a designated person who can make health care and treatment decisions for me if I am not able to make those decisions for myself. I have an advanced directive, which states my preferences for end-of-life treatment or for the withdrawal of such treatment. In the event that Larry is not here, my older son is my executor and has my power of attorney; my younger son is my health care surrogate. How did I make those choices? I confess to you that it was solely based on their personality types. I want my executor to be organized; I want my health care surrogate to be compassionate!

Do the mental checklist yourself: up-to-date will; power of attorney; health care surrogate; advanced directive. On October 31, we will offer a seminar here on end-of-life issues led by Jim Wagner who can provide information and assistance to you on these documents as well as other concerns. I urge you to make that seminar a priority.

Second, our close family members need to know where all those documents are that they will need to locate when we die: bank accounts, mortgage, investments, loans, insurance, retirement or work benefits, credit card information. And don't forget the passwords to all those important computer links and folders.

Third, we need to talk with our loved ones and dear friends about what we think and believe about death itself. Then there are other details: What are my end-of-life wishes in terms of life support? Do I want to donate my organs, do I want to be cremated or buried, and where do I want my remains to be? How do I want my life to be honored and remembered? What kind of memorial service do I want to have, when and where, and what might I want that service to include? We have a very simple form about memorial services for church members to fill out, which we keep on file in the church office. Copies are available in the church office and foyer.

I confess that, as a younger adult, I didn't think about bringing up all these issues with our parents, and, by the time it became clear that I needed to have those conversations, it was too late. With my own sons, the conversation about all the legal documents was easy. Beyond that, my excuses begin. I feel like I don't have all the information about bank accounts, insurance and stuff organized clearly enough to show my sons where it all is. I know I need to do that, and yet somehow I never get around to it. Talking about death itself – shouldn't that be simple for me, a minister? I do it all the time with church members. Somehow, it's different with my sons. It never seems to be the RIGHT time and I haven't yet figured out how to announce that I want to have "the death talk." And that's all compounded because there are some things I'm still trying to figure out, some things I haven't yet made my own commitment. So I've written this sermon for myself, to remind me this year, to talk with my children. And I've written this sermon for you: in relation to your parents or your adult children or your partner or spouse or dear friend. Together, we can cut through the silence and the excuses, and in the process, as a spiritual community, we can support one another.

I have been privileged to walk the journey of life's passage with many church members and their families and I have seen the grace that happens when that silence is broken. I think of Jana Col, a wonderful woman, wife and mother of a ten year old son when she got the terrible news of her cancer. Jana chose to affirm life. She was open

and communicative with the people she loved. She sought healing wherever she could; she focused on her spiritual journey. The week before she died, Jana was sitting in the back of the Sanctuary on Humor Sunday, laughing. She died sooner than she had expected.

More recently, Kathy Cantwell, a wonderful woman, partner and friend, got the terrible news of her cancer. She chose not to seek treatment and planned instead for her death. Kathy talked openly and honestly about her life, her beliefs and her fears; she planned every detail of her green burial; she said her good-byes. Kathy's death came more slowly than she had expected.

It's important to remember that death, like birth, still comes at unexpected ways and in unexpected ways. It is crucial to make and to communicate our plans, while at the same time knowing that at some point we are called to let go. My prayer for myself and for all of us is that when that moment of letting go comes, we will know that we have said what we needed to say, that we have done what we have needed to do, and we can trust that our loved ones, our friends, our ministers, and our congregation will step in and do the rest - and that all shall indeed be well. Finally, the truth about death walks hand in hand with the truth about life. As the Bible says, in the book of Romans, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. We live to God and we die to God."

Kazuo Ishiguro's touching novel, *Never Let Me Go*, is about specially gifted and selected in an elite English school who live in a unique and isolated environment. The film based on this novel is about to be released, and one reviewer describes it as a superb poignant film about love unto death. I will not spoil the film, or the novel, by giving you the full details, but the children in this school are destined to live short lives, only into their twenties. The book and the film are metaphors of the brevity of our time on this earth, about the reality that we are all going to die. The question Ishiguro raises is how do we make the best use of that time, so that before our time is up, we will have a sense of completion. The true question about death is the question of life. How am I living today so that my life is meaningful, so that my legacy is what I wish it to be?

At the Friday afternoon prayers at the Hoda Islamic Center in Gainesville, the visiting Imam from the Committee on American-Islamic relations shared the six basic principles of Islam, one of which is to prepare for the after-life. He said that the most important preparation for the afterlife is to live fully, honestly, compassionately, clearly, meaningfully in this life. And one unavoidable element of a good and caring life is being open and clear about our faith and our questions and our plans for our own dying.

David Hackett, a UCG member, says that he attends Memorial Services here whenever he can, not only to honor the person who has died, not only to support their family and friends, but also because those services are a strong reminder to him of what his life purpose is. He notes that while we come to UCG memorial services to commemorate the life of a loved one, we go away with a reminder of what we are living for.

That is my wish for myself and for each of you this morning, that we go away from here with a reminder of what we are living for; that we share this meaning of our life and the meaning of death with those we love, making the plans and preparations we need; and that we then let go, knowing that we are God's, held in grace, and transformed by our awareness of our immortal spiritual soul while we live fully each day as mortal human beings.

Prayer:

O Holy One, Whose presence we know by many names and in many ways, we breathe in your peace, a peace that fills our hearts and our souls in the midst of life's sorrows and life's joys.

In the sweetness of life, may we have the wisdom to savor the moment, to cherish beauty, to live with authenticity, and to love generously.

In the transitions of life, may we have the faith to trust our deepest hopes, to honor our visions, to share openly with our loved ones, and to love generously.

In life, in death, we turn to You, O God, to Your promises of a heavenly home with many rooms where we are welcomed, of a place of still waters and green meadows where our souls are renewed and restored, of a realm of pure light and lightness where each and every one is at last its truest self, all that dwells on the other side of what we see.

Guide us, we pray, in the great river of life and death that flows behind us and before us, that carries us to You, now and forever more. Amen.

Some resources:

- ◆ [A Clergy Guide to End-of-Life Issues](#), by Martha R. Jacobs, Pilgrim Press, 2010.
- ◆ Funeral Consumers Alliance. Contact at www.funerals.org. A national, nonprofit, nonsectarian organization dedicated to protecting the public's right to choose meaningful, dignified, affordable funerals. Two practical booklets: "Before I Go, You Should Know" and "Five Steps."
- ◆ http://endlink.lurie.northwestern.edu/more_about/communities.cfm. EndLink is an Internet-based-end-of-life care education program established by the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University.
- ◆ www.deathisnottheenemy.com. Included is information about how to purchase additional resources, including the booklet *Caring Conversations*.

If you know of other good resources, e-mail the church office and Sandy will continue to supplement this list.