

THE WISDOM DEATH BRINGS

August 16, 2009

Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches

I Kings 2: 1-4, 10-12; 3: 1-5

In the book, **Bird by Bird**, Anne Lamott tells the story of the time her best friend in the world, Pammy, a single mom like herself, was dying of cancer. Lamott found herself deeply depressed and angry and sad, so she sought out Pammy's physician, who happened also to be a personal friend. He said, "Watch her carefully right now, because she is teaching you how to live." Lamott reflects:

"I remind myself of this when I cannot get any work done: to live as if I'm dying, because the truth is we are all terminal on this bus. To live as if we are dying gives us a chance to experience some real presence. Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way; full in a way life is for children. They spend big, round hours. So instead of staring miserably at the computer screen trying to will my way into having a writer's breakthrough, I say to myself, 'Okay, hmmm, let's see. Dying tomorrow. What should I do today?'"

Pammy's doctor was right; dying people truly teach us how to live. I have worked as a chaplain for Hospice of Lubbock for 15 years now and one of the gifts I receive almost every day in my work with the dying is that it keeps me focused on the things that are truly important for a full and meaningful life. If I am honest, there are times when dealing with so much suffering gets to me and I wonder if it is time to do something else. These doubts usually surface when I have done three funerals in one week and I am physically and emotionally exhausted and can't imagine hearing one more person's sad story. But once I'm rested and back in the flow, I continue to feel energized and empowered by my ministry with dying people and their families. I have often said that just going to work each day puts a bad hair day or a fight with my dear husband into perspective pretty quickly. But the wisdom I have gained from dying people and their families goes far beyond my hair and my petty fights with Kyle and enriches my life and my faith in profound ways.

Our scripture this morning reminds us that death is a part of life and as I remind my husband, it's not if we are going to die, but when. Most of the time when we are healthy, we live as though we are going to live forever and it is not until we get sick that we come to know that sooner or later we will "go the way of all the earth." In the book, **At the Will of the Body**, the medical sociologist

Arthur Frank relates his experience with a heart attack and testicular cancer at the young age of 40. I shared his wisdom with you a few months ago and today I have another of Arthur Frank's appropriate insights into the gift of our lives from the brink of his near death experience.

“The ultimate value of illness is that it teaches us the value of being alive. Like Job, I have had my goods restored to me. Secure in the knowledge that I am dust, I enjoy what I have. I even run again, not as far or as fast, but with greater pleasure. I want to keep running, but someday I will have to stop. I do not know what that day will be like. If I have recovered well but not too much, I will remember a poem I keep over my desk by the late Raymond Carver, called '*Gravy.*' A man, an alcoholic, is about to die, but he changes his habits and lives for ten years. Then he gets a brain disease and again is dying. He tells his friends not to mourn:

"I've had ten years longer than I or anyone expected. Pure gravy. And don't you forget it."

Abraham Joshua Heschel, philosopher, social activist, theologian, and rabbi, was one of the most influential religious thinkers of our

time. Several years before he died, he suffered a near-fatal heart attack. A friend came to visit and found the great man weak and pale, speaking slowly, almost in a whisper. “Sam,” he said, “when I regained consciousness, my first feelings were not of despair and anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment. I have seen so many miracles. I prayed the old Yiddish prayer: ‘I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder. And you gave it to me’” (**I Asked for Wonder**, Introduction, Samuel H. Dresner, ed).

“When David’s time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying, ‘I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn.’ Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David.”

I love David’s last words to Solomon and how he intentionally passed on to Solomon his faith and his values as well as his desires for Solomon’s life. Often I am fortunate to witness dying people’s last conversations with their loved ones and again I am on holy ground as I hear the struggles and joys of their lives and the blessings and desires they wish to pass on.

Some people's last words to their loved ones are words of blessing and gratitude and some are true pleas for forgiveness and reconciliation. I'll never forget the afternoon that Randy, a 45-year-old cantankerous and dear man dying of a rare form of bone cancer, asked his wife for forgiveness from being a horse's butt. He had originally asked me to tell her after he died how sorry he was and when I refused to do his dirty work for him, he called her into our conversation, held her hand and said he was so sorry for causing them both such heartache and pain in their life together. He said to his beloved so eloquently, "I don't know how you put up with me all these years and I'll never understand why you didn't take me out behind the barn and just shoot me after I so blatantly had an affair with a bimbo when I was told that I was dying!" Through laughter and tears, his wonderful wife said, "I'm not sure right now why I didn't shoot you years ago, but I love you and I forgive you and it's all going to be okay." Randy died peacefully the next morning with his wife of 25 years at his side.

A while ago, I had the privilege of being with a 51 year old man living with a brain tumor. Mike is not as ornery and difficult as Randy was but the time I spent with Mike, his wife and two young sons was no less poignant. Mike is no longer able to work but still enjoys eating out and spending time in his beautiful yard. He told us how great it is for him to wake up each day and realize that he is

still alive. While he doesn't understand why he has to die now with so much living and loving left to participate in and he is sometimes angry and scared, Mike no longer takes for granted anything in this good life. He wanted Rita and his sons to know how much he would always love them and how proud he was of them and how guilty he felt for leaving them, for not being able to provide for them and for causing them such pain. Through tears and laughter they told him how much they would always love him, how they knew he didn't want to leave them and how they would never forget some of his odd, quirky ways! He ended our time together by proclaiming to them that he was not yet gone and they were still going to have to do what he said, and they all just laughed and his older son said, "Why would we begin to take you seriously, now?!"

Randy and Mike both wanted to share with their families and friends the importance of our relationships with those we hold dear. Dying people remind us of how our lives and souls are shaped by the connections we have with other people, and in their vulnerability and dependence we see most clearly that we are put on this earth to love one another, to help one another and to watch out for one another. Martin Marty, the editor of **The Christian Century** for many years, keeps on his study wall an inscription given to him by a Lutheran Bishop a long time ago:

“Life is short and we have not much time for
gladdening the hearts of those who travel the way with
us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind.”

One of the most poignant blessings I have ever read was the lengthy, articulate, and love-filled letter that the famous tennis player, Arthur Ashe wrote to his young daughter, Camera, a few weeks before he died. This letter is the last chapter of the book he began writing about a year before he died in February 1993. His editor (Arnold Rampersad) and his dear wife (Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe) completed his memoir, **Days of Grace**, a month after he died in order to pay tribute to Arthur and to share his amazing life with the world. The following is a small portion of what Arthur wanted to leave with his daughter and it is a gift not only to her but to us as well:

My Dear Camera,

By the time you read this letter from me to you for the first time, I may not be around to discuss with you what I have written here. Perhaps I will still be with you and your mother, sharing in your daily lives, in your joys and in your sorrows. However, I may be gone. You would doubtless be sad that I am gone, and remember me clearly for a while.

Then I will exist only as a memory already beginning to fade in your mind. Although it is natural for memories to fade, I am writing this letter in the hope that your recollection of me will never fade completely. I would like to remain a part of your life, Camera, for as long as you live.

I was only a few months older than you are now when I lost my own mother. Eventually I had no memory of what she was actually like, how her voice sounded, how her touch felt. I wanted desperately to know these things, but she was gone and I could not recover that knowledge. For your sake, as well as mine, I hope that I am around for a long time. But we cannot always have what we want, and we must prepare for and accept those changes over which we have no control.

...Spiritual nourishment is as important as physical nourishment, or intellectual nourishment. The religion you choose is not nearly as important as a fundamental faith in God. As a child, I went to Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches; later, I went to a Catholic church because I was living with a family who worshiped there. Mommy herself is a Catholic and goes to mass, as you know. These and other religions, some of them outside of Christianity, are all roads that lead to God. Beyond the different dogmas must

be a sense of yourself as created by God for a purpose, and as being under God's law at all times. Be ruled by that rule called golden: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Do not beg God for favors. Instead, ask God for the wisdom to know what is right, what God wants done, and the will to do it. Know the Bible. Read the psalms and the Sermon on the Mount and everything else in that timeless book. You will find consolation in your darkest hours. You will find inscribed there the meaning of life and the way you should live. You will grow into a deeper understanding of life's meanings. Religions sometimes clash and compete, but there is a reservoir of truth and guidance in the Bible that is beyond controversy and is always available to you.

...I may not be walking with you all the way, or even much of the way, as I walk with you now. Don't be angry with me if I am not there in person, alive and well, when you need me. I would like nothing more than to be with you always. Do not feel sorry for me if I am gone. When we were together, I loved you deeply and you gave me so much happiness I can never repay you. Camera, wherever I am when you feel sick at heart and weary of live, or when you stumble and fall and don't know if you can get up again, think of me. I will be watching and smiling and cheering you on."

“When David’s time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying, ‘I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn.’ Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David.”

Loving God, may the stories we hear about illness and death truly teach us how to live more passionately and more faithfully. We are humbled by the fact that we will never fully understand the mystery of death this side of heaven and we are aware of our utter dependence upon your love and grace to see us through the loss of our loved ones when death forever takes their physical presence from us. Help us to always see life as a gift and to understand that what we do with our lives is our gift back to God. O God, thank you for the fullness of life you offer to us as we open our selves to you, to others, and to the opportunities of life in our midst that we might continue to be saved. In the name of our Lord Jesus who showed us long ago how to love and to live, we pray, Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of Faith and Giver of Life,

We come to worship today with an awareness that life is messy and relationships are often complicated. It is difficult for us to admit that we do not always treat those whom we love with respect and consistency. We say things we don't mean and we leave unsaid the love and care we intend to communicate. As you know, we often lose our best selves in the midst of problems and we fail in our attempts to always be authentic, responsive, and honest people. We take for granted those closest to us, the gift of life itself and the hopes, passions, dreams and fullness of each day. Forgive us for the times we refuse the grace and mercy which would nourish and sustain the parched and starving places scattered within the depths of our soul.

As we face the reality of our own mortality, may we be open to living our lives more faithfully, more intentionally, and more passionately. Give us the courage we need to care for other people and to allow other people to care for us. On this day we pray for our friends and family who are sick, hospitalized, depressed, alone, struggling in relationships, grieving, receiving treatments, or wondering how to make life better. Give them the strength they need to reach out for what they need and give us the perspective, energy, words, and love we need to embrace them and to care for them in the midst of dark times. In the name of the one who gives

us life, shows us love and never takes us for granted we pray,
Amen.