"Speaking of Dying"
Readings & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
October 6, 2013

"Last Days" (slightly adapted) by Donald Hall

Jane's hematologist Letha Mills sat down,
stiff, her assistant
standing with her back to the door.
"I have terrible news,"
Letha told them. "The leukemia is back.
There's nothing to do."
The four of them wept. He asked how long,
why did it happen now?
Jane asked only: "Can I die at home?"

Home that afternoon,
they threw her medicines into the trash.
Jane vomited. He wailed
while she remained dry-eyed – silent,
trying to let go. At night
he picked up the telephone to make
calls that brought
a child or a friend into the horror.

The next morning,
they worked choosing among her poems,
… picked hymns for her funeral,
and supplied each
other words as they wrote
and revised her obituary. The day after,
with more work to do
on her book, he saw how weak she felt,
and said maybe not now; maybe
later. Jane shook her head: "Now," she said.
"We have to finish it now."
Later, as she slid exhausted into sleep,
she said, "Wasn't that fun?
To work together? Wasn't that fun?"

He asked her, "What clothes
should we dress you in, when we bury you?"
"I hadn't thought," she said.

"I wondered about the white salwar
kameez," he said –
her favorite Indian silk they bought
in Pondicherry a year
and a half before ….
She smiled. "Yes. Excellent," she said.
He didn't tell her
that a year earlier, dreaming awake,
he had seen her
in the coffin in her white salwar kameez.
Still, he couldn't stop
planning. That night he broke out with,
"When Gus dies I'll
have him cremated and scatter his ashes
on your grave!" She laughed
and her big eyes quickened and she nodded:
"It will be good
for the daffodils." She lay pallid back
on the flowered pillow:
"Perkins, how do you think of these things?"

They talked about their
adventures – driving through England
when they first married,
and excursions to China and India.
Also they remembered
ordinary days – pond summers, working
on poems together,
walking the dog, reading Chekhov
aloud. When he praised
thousands of afternoon assignations
that carried them into
bliss and repose on this painted bed,
Jane burst into tears
and cried [out] …

Incontinent three nights
before she died, Jane needed lifting
onto the commode.
He wiped her and helped her back into bed.
At five he fed the dog
and returned to find her across the room,
sitting in a straight chair.

When she couldn't stand, how could she walk?
He feared she would fall
and called for an ambulance to the hospital,
but when he told Jane,
her mouth twisted down and tears started.
"Do we have to?" He canceled.
Jane said, "Perkins, be with me when I die."

"Dying is simple," she said.
"What's worst is… the separation."
When she no longer spoke,
they lay along together, touching,
and she fixed on him
her beautiful enormous round brown eyes,
shining, unblinking,
and passionate with love and dread.

One by one they came,
the oldest and dearest, to say goodbye
to this friend of the heart.
At first she said their names, wept, and touched;
then she smiled; then
turned one mouth-corner up. On the last day
she stared silent goodbyes
with her hands curled and her eye stuck open.

Leaving his place beside her,
where her eyes stared, he told her,
"I'll put these letters
in the box." She had not spoken
for three hours, and now Jane said
her last words: "O.K."

At eight that night,
her eyes open as they stayed
until she died, brain-stem breathing
started, he bent to kiss
her pale cool lips again, and felt them
one last time gather
and purse and peck to kiss him back.

In the last hours, she kept
her forearms raised with pale fingers clenched

at cheek level, like
the goddess figurine over the bathroom sink.
Sometimes her right fist flicked
or spasmed toward her face. For twelve hours
until she died, he kept
scratching Jane Kenyon's big bony nose.
A sharp, almost sweet
smell began to rise from her open mouth.
He watched her chest go still.
With his thumb he closed her round brown eyes.

"My Cup" by Robert Friend

They tell me I am going to die.

Why don't I seem to care?

My cup is full. Let it spill.

I begin with a caveat: Although this sermon is about dying, it is about dying the kind of death that follows an illness whether that illness spans the course of weeks, months or even years. This sermon is not about the kind of death that is sudden whether accidental, violent, or the result of a massive stroke or heart attack, for example. There will be, because there must be, a sermon that takes up the particular shock and grief that is the sudden death. But for today, we're going to focus on the slow fade to black. I hope that this caveat, a most humble gesture, lessens the loneliness suffered by those Souls here who have lost a loved one in this way. My heart goes out to you.

With that, we begin.

"Dying is simple." So said the dying woman.

But dying is anything but simple for we who dwell in a land that is far afield from death. Most of us don't live on the farm any longer, where being witness to an animal's life cycle is a clear reminder of mortality. Instead most of us dwell in the

fairy tale land of modern medicine, convinced that we can elude death and live happily ever after forever and ever. In fact, one poet wrote as much,

I wish i could dance in the rain,
I wish i could believe beyond the problem,
I wish i could live beyond death,
If life was a fairytale, i would live forever." Erickson Kidiga (excerpt)

To which I will respond in this poetry-slam right here in the middle of the sermon:

"Go dance in the rain, Dude.
and go believe beyond that problem.
Love is strong as death.
And blessedly, life is no fairytale.
We none of us will live forever."

At least one theologian has named this conundrum as the central religious quest: to come to terms with this truest story: "There is a beginning and an ending for everything that is alive."*

But we resist. The most straightforward description of the last days conjures a sense of dread. We brace ourselves fearing that we will be undone. And of course, we *are* undone by Donald Hall's poem that describes his wife's last days and the dignified manner in which he tended to her dying.

But any one of us may be undone on any given Sunday. And for all who come undone during the course of the service, there are as many of us who *arrive* already undone. Which is precisely why there are tissues underneath the seats. There may be no crying in baseball but there is plenty of crying in Unity Hall! But here there is as much crying as there is courage, strength, renewal, and joy so coming undone doesn't mean we can't be put back together again. The hope is that you will leave feeling *l*ess undone for having experienced and participated in worship. So brave it and come undone. Because you don't want to be the bride who works so hard at not coming undone that she misses the wedding. Ditto the groom, by the way. You don't want to be the widower who works so hard at not coming undone that he misses his wife's memorial service. Ditto the widow.

I invite you to grab a tissue and risk coming undone – or else risk missing the worship service trying *not* to come undone.

Let's get on with it.

We begin with a British anthropologist's study with this tantalizing title, "The Pornography of Death." (Geoffrey Gorer) Basically, he notes the similar ways we treat sexuality and dying as in the more we hide death from sight, the more perverted, gross, and disgusting the topic becomes. So although we are treated to all sorts of visions of dying in popular culture, few of them even remotely resemble an accurate glimpse of the dying process. The smart man writes,

> *Today, the natural processes of [physical] corruption and decay have become disgusting …. Natural death and physical decomposition have become too horrible to contemplate or to discuss. [Indeed], while natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences. If we dislike the modern pornography of death, then we must give back to death – natural death – its parade and publicity, re-admit grief and mourning.*

When do you think the smart anthropologist was making these observations? 1955. So, this culture has been a long time coming. Today we're in it up to our necks making our perceptions pretty out of whack.

When we DO contemplate dying, we express our longing to "die with dignity." Dying with dignity: what do you imagine that would look like? Here's what I bet most of us are imagining.

Foremost, we are determined that we *are not* a burden to our loved ones. And by this we mean that there will be no dealing with the "*natural processes of [physical] corruption and decay.*" There will be nothing *disgusting or too horrible to contemplate or to discuss.*

That said, in the last days, we are coherently communicating with our dearly beloved. As we are living in our imagination now, in the last days we are poetic,

even. The great Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, died a few weeks ago. Much was made of the last words he spoke to his wife. "Don't be afraid". Sent by text, no less! In death, we all want to be Seamus Heaney.

In the last days, we are breathing freely without artificial means.

And it was exactly at this point of my writing that my sister-in-law called with the news that the cousin who had been ill for a year had died. Relieved she said, "He died peacefully at home. He did not suffer." she assured me. "There were no tubes."

Exactly.

We are breathing on our own; there are no tubes.

We are breathing on our own and therefore; we are unencumbered. We breathe freely and move freely. Most vitally and imperatively important of all, we are able to walk to the commode and wipe ourselves.

So, we've got the picture: basically, dying with dignity means dying with all of your faculties intact. But Friends, if all of your faculties are intact, if all those systems are "go", you're not "going" anywhere *because you're not dying.*

To state out loud what you all know: a natural death is when our bodies begin to shut down. And when our bodies are shutting down, it gets messy. And for many of us, it's the "messy" that freaks us out for in our fairy tale perception of dying, messy is undignified. Our desperate hope to avoid the "messy" is the definition of "natural death being smothered in prudery."

We need to get over that. And by "we" I mean both the dying as well as those who care for the dying.

Those who companion a loved one through this last chapter often describe it as a deeply moving experience: the honor of lovingly helping another person cross over with love and gentleness. Let me take you to a few of these rooms and we'll peek in.

I am sitting in a quiet room with Liz Maxwell, matriarch of this congregation for a generation. There is the whirring of machines accompanying me as I sing hymns at her bedside. As I sing, she takes her last breath. I am looking into Nic Franz' eyes – Nic who knew every nook and cranny of both these buildings and how they worked - and I am asking him, "Do you know what's happening?" There are tubes and IV lines everywhere. He nods. "Don't be afraid." I assure him. I am sitting in awe as Mary Wade says to me of dying in the same quirky, curious way she approached everything, "I'm just so curious." I lie down next to my best friend now in a coma and too weak to get to the commode on his own. I assure him that we have taken care of the last bit of unfinished business: "Jeanette is going to take Nauggie." Nauggie is his dog. We all know that he needs to know that the Nauggie is going to be okay.

Beautiful memories albeit messy too: Incontinent. Unable to stand up. Unable to walk. Mouths twisted. Hands reaching out in spasms. Almost sweet breath.

Here's the thing; here's what dying with dignity means: no matter what, if the dying soul is at peace, the dying is dignified. Because dying with dignity has *nothing* to do with the physical act of dying. Dying with dignity is only about our spiritual attitude about dying. It's about exacting meaning and peace from the prospect. Here's dying with dignity:

They tell me I am going to die.
Why don't I seem to care?
My cup is full. Let it spill.

What a gentle place to land, Friends. "My cup is full. Let it spill." That's peace. That's dignity. And it takes work, spiritual work, to get to that place. Remember that theologian I mentioned a while back? The one who believed that accepting that we will die is the central religious task? That means it demands our attention *before* we get the scary diagnosis. Before the hematologist says the dreaded words, "I have terrible news."

Ministers likely spend more time than most in said contemplation. So when I was diagnosed with a lousy cancer nearly two years ago, all that contemplation came in handy. It was from a place of peace that I was able to reassure my dearly beloved that no matter what happened – whether I beat this thing or it

beat me – that everything was going to be all right. I was going to be all right and so would they – and so would *you*.

Don't get me wrong: as Jane Kenyon said, "dying is simple. What's worst is the separation." For, the separation is existential on several levels not the least of which is the lonely island upon which the ill person is stranded and from which she must find her way back – or not – alone.

But the dying part had less of a claim on me. I did not feel inspired by the "battle this thing" fight song that so often serenades the cancer patient from the sidelines – much to my mother's chagrin, I will tell you. (And if my own daughter should be stricken with cancer my inner fight might well rise up with the ferocity of Zena the Warrior Princess.) I dutifully I did all I could do but for me it was less of a battle than it was a passive acceptance of the one shot to treat the cancer that I would allow myself. I accept that that lousy cancer may well be the death of me. Maybe not. But maybe so. And if it comes to that I will lean on my faith, years of contemplation and say with all gratitude, "They tell me I am going to die. / Why don't I seem to care? / My cup is full. Let it spill."

And I hope that my dearly beloved will gather round and bravely come undone. And care for me as tenderly as I have strived to care for them in this life. And I hope that there will be laughter and hymn singing. And I hope that in the last days – those messy last days – there will be the peace that flows from dignity. That I will rest assured that my work is done. That my cup will gently spill over.

And that is my hope and my prayer for all of you. That you will give over to the work you each must do to best assure that you die with dignity. That as a congregation we will, in the words of the insightful anthropologist, "*give back to death – natural death – its parade and publicity, [and] re-admit grief and mourning.*" That we will gather here in Unity Hall confident that there will always be someone standing besides us – and there will always be tissues under the seats.

And when the time comes, there will be good grief. Death's sting will be softened by the gathering up of Beloved Community for the memorial service. There will be laughter just as sure as there will be tears. And there will be Betsey

Fox buzzing around the kitchen preparing for the sweet balm of community that will come later. And there will be Pat Abraham's diamond shaped almond cookies. And Erika Harger's rhubarb cake. And Clare Evento's banana bread. And Carol Bunting's crust less spinach quiche. And Lynn Tavormina's apple cake. And Ginny Campbell's cookies packed in old-fashioned tins. And there will be the sweet treat you bring to the table.

And we will give death its due as we celebrate the life and mourn the death of those we have loved.

And the dead will rest in peace and rest assured. As will the living.

Oh how I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.

Amen.