

The Secret of Dying Well

All Saints Day

II Timothy 4:6-8; Luke 23:44-49

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This service is such a moving experience. To see all of you streaming to the Table, to know the wonder of a loving community is quite overwhelming. What a beautiful privilege it is-for us to be here together with sacred memories and stories. As we continue to celebrate this All Saints Day, I want to think with you for a few moments on "The Secret of Dying Well."

If you read the Gospels, there is no way you can reconcile the way in which Jesus died. It's generally considered that Mark is the earliest Gospel; Matthew and Luke followed him very closely, and John, of course, stands out by himself. But, if you read those four accounts, you will find that Matthew is pretty much an exact replica of Mark, so there you have one picture and it is the picture of Jesus in utter desolation, crying out in the darkness of that hour, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" If you would go to John, you would find that John's portrait of Jesus is a Jesus who is simply in control. As the Passion story opens, Jesus says, "I lay down my life. No one takes it from me." And throughout that passion account, it is obvious that Jesus is really in charge, even though he is a prisoner about to be crucified. His final words include taking care of his mother, acknowledging his thirst, and then saying, "It is finished. My work is finished. Completed. Done."

Luke, although he follows Mark as does Matthew, does not follow Mark in the account of the crucifixion. You will remember the familiar crucifixion story of Luke. It is beautiful, Jesus experiencing all of the horror of the darkness that the human family is capable of, expressing gracious forgiveness, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." Hanging there between two criminals, one on his right and one on his left, railed on by one, beseeched by another to be remembered, In the midst of his own anguish, he reached out as always he had done, and said, "Today you will be with me." And then, borrowing the Psalmist's expression, he died trustingly, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

From the utter desolation of Mark and Matthew to the Jesus in charge in John, to the rather human, beautiful Jesus of Luke, you can't possibly reconcile those accounts and we know now that those are not words from the cross, anyway. These Gospels, written decades after the event, were certainly based on memory and oral tradition. Some such expressions could have been made, but we don't know that and that doesn't really matter because what we do know is that the Gospel writers were painting portraits for us. They were artists. They were painting portraits of a life, and they painted portraits of this life in its dying.

John, for me, is a bit too contrived, Jesus a bit too above it all. Matthew and Mark - well, I'm glad for them because I know it is true to human experience that there are those times when the only thing we can say is, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" and so, I'm glad that there was a portrait of Jesus that identified him with that kind of human desolation. But, as for me, I have to choose Luke because Luke seems to reflect in Jesus' death the way Jesus was in his life, that amazing, gracious, forgiving of those who were doing him wrong. It is amazing. I think "Father, forgive them" has to be one of the most startling revelations possible. How is it possible? And yet, what we have imbibed about Jesus makes that so consistent with who he is pictured to be, reaching out in compassion and in care, so characteristic of his life, and then, finally, that deep trust and the grace to let go, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Three different portraits, three different stories, you can choose your own favorite, and maybe sometimes you will choose one and maybe sometimes you will choose another. There are times when we need all of those. But, again, I choose Luke because it speaks so powerfully to me of what I have come so deeply to believe, and that is that the secret of dying well is living well. Living with a grace to forgive others and ourselves, living with the kind of care and compassion that draws us out of ourselves to embrace the other, living with the kind of deep peace that in fundamental trust allows us to let go. I think the secret of dying well is living well.

It was true of Paul in his own final testimony. We have it in the Second Letter to Timothy, "The time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have run the race, I have kept the faith." The secret of dying well is living well, living with a purpose and a passion, committed, devoted, fascinated, having one's life grasped by that which is bigger than oneself, that which is full of grace, of love and joy and freedom.

Bonhoeffer died that way. When they called his name, he said to his English fellow prisoner, "This is the end, for me the beginning of life." And in the case of Paul, there was this deep conviction about that final vindication of all things. Paul had that apocalyptic sense of the imminent end of the End of history. Bonhoeffer had that, too. He had at least a deep sense of the presence of God in his life. Stories - Jesus, Paul, Bonhoeffer.

I had an interesting experience this summer. It's well known here that my Tuesdays are kept with religious devotion at the table down at Duba's, and this one whom I have come to know so well and love so dearly and respect so deeply, Duncan Littlefair, had a medical problem with complications, so that he drifted near the edge, intense pain, the deep of the night. And in his return to the table, he was so anxious to tell us of being so near the edge where one could really let go and move into the darkness, but peacefully. This good friend of mine is a religious naturalist for whom this life is the gift of life and to be lived well without anything beyond. I see him in such peace, such wonder and awe at the gift of life. Another story.

If you were told that this was the last day that you were to live, how would you spend it? I hope you'd spend it just the way you intended to spend it before you found out that it was the last day, that life was so good, that it was lived with such grace, that purpose was pursued passionately with all of one's energies and all of one's gifts were drawn out of oneself so that notification of the end would be just the natural course of things. Stories - Jesus, Paul, Bonhoeffer, Duncan Littlefair.

I am convinced that whatever there is in that mystery that is our source and our ultimate destination, to live well these days is the secret of dying well, to live without denial, to die without regret, to live fully, to give ourselves in prodigal abandon to enjoy, to be free... Ahhh, good friends, it is so good and so rich. The secret of dying well is living well and it is for us to live well today.

As has been announced here last week, I have pneumonia and on Thursday I had an X-ray. I have had such wonderful medical care from Dan Powers and so he wanted an X-ray so he could see me on Friday to see if the antibiotic had won the battle or not. I showed up on Friday, was called in and faced that awful moment when you're asked to step on the scale, and then I offered my arm for the blood pressure to be taken and in those moments, my heart began to race in a way that I have never experienced before. I know now for you medical people out there that it was an SVT, a super ventricular something or other. I'm sitting there, my blood pressure's good, my weight's awful, and my heart's beating twice as fast as it should. So, Dan told me that the X-ray showed there was still pneumonia, that pneumonia could trigger this kind of thing, but I had to go to the ER. So, I made my way to the Emergency Room for the second time in ten days and, of course, when someone comes in with a racing heart, they don't monkey around. They send the wheelchair with you and on the bed and all kinds of wires and hook-ups and one thing and another, and when they got me all set and were ready to read the whole thing, the heart went back to normal.

But, of course, they don't let you out of those places so easily. They ask all kinds of questions about why would that happen? So, I had six hours in the Emergency Room on Friday to contemplate my All Saints Day sermon theme. You have to believe that I was thinking about it, and I was thinking about me thinking about it. I want to say this morning, the thesis holds. The thesis holds. So many things

to live for, so many people to live for, so many horizons yet to journey toward. So many of the wonderful joys of life. But, if Friday had been the last Friday, it would have been fine, because by the grace of God and the love and grace of this community and my own beautiful family, surrounded with friends, My God!, how life has been so good. I am convinced that the secret of dying well is living well.

Live well, good folks, be good to yourselves, forgive yourselves, forgive one another, embrace, leave no stone unturned for kindness and justice and peace. All will be well. All will be-well. All manner of things will be well. Thanks be to God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. First published in 1953; First Touchstone Edition, 1997.