

The Grace to Let Go As Death Approaches

I Corinthians 15: 42-44, 50, 53-58

Luke 23:32-34, 44-46

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Funeral Meditation and Prayer for Richard J. Westhoff
VBK Chapel, Grand Haven, Michigan

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If I have the timing right, it was three weeks ago today that Rich and family met with the Hospice nurse. Three days later I stopped by to be with Rich and Mary – Kathy was there as well. As always with Rich and Mary, it was very easy, warm, relaxed. We spoke about the doctor's report, the recognition that the cancer was raging, that Hospice had been engaged. The full seriousness of his failing health was in full view.

At one point he looked at me, put his hand on my arm – we were sitting at the dining room table – and he said, "Will you do my funeral?" Our eyes met and I responded, "Of course; I wouldn't let anyone else do it!" He smiled and I smiled.

I've been with my people on numerous occasions at their dying. I've marveled at the mystery – one minute alive, breathing. Then no more. I've thought much about the mystery of life and life moving into death. And, frankly, I guess I would have to say I'm really quite comfortable in those situations. But I must say those moments with Rich were so rich, so honest. I left with that sense so strongly felt.

I had affirmed the decisions he made along the way. An awful course of chemo which did not fully free him of the awful disease and his decision: no more! Let me live being myself as well as I can as long as I can.

And he did. He found a period of a good quality of life. And then when the cancer came on in full force he had no regrets. When the time came, Hospice was called in. And then it was time to go to the nursing home.

Nancy and I went to him when we learned he was there. At the door the nurse said, "First room on the left. We just got him resting. Try not to waken him." Well, I just smiled at her and we made our way to the room. He was quiet, eyes closed, but I had a little business to do with him....

I took his hand. He opened his eyes and we were in touch; he was with me.

“The Lord is my shepherd.... He responded at each phrase, affirming the beautiful expressions of trust in the Psalm.

And the benediction “The Lord bless you and keep you,” my hand on his forehead and he fully receptive, aware, affirming. And then the words of Julian of Norwich, which have become a mantra for those of us who were Christ Community:

All will be well, all will be well,
All manner of things will be well.

Those were very moving moments. As his pastor I knew I had had closure with this dear man – and there are no holier moments than when there is the grace to let go as death approaches. That is what struck me and I found so beautiful in Rich’s departing from all he loved and those who so dearly loved him.

Next Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. I always loved that service. There was such honesty about it, such authenticity –

The people came forward, knelt and, as I made the sign of the cross with the ashes on their foreheads, I would say, “Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return.”

Those words come from Genesis 3 and the context is God’s judgment on the first human couple for their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. This, of course, is biblical myth – our stories of origin which had profound truths but also much we have moved beyond. As much as I love those words, “Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return,” I want to move them out of the context of death as the result of human disobedience. To do so, I must argue with St. Paul who was formed by that biblical story and perpetuated the idea that death was “the last enemy.” He states this in the context of his sense of history’s calendar. Paul thought he was living at the end of history. But, of course, two thousand years later we know he was wrong about history’s course and, I would maintain, about death as the last enemy. He believed death was God’s judgment on human transgression, believing as he did in the biblical story of “the Fall” of our first parents.

Let me keep to the biblical story but go to Jesus. As I have said, we stand at the threshold of another Lent. We will follow Jesus to Calvary. Speaking truth to power, he is a threat to the Temple leadership and to Roman power. Condemned to die, he is crucified by the powers that be. How did he die in spite of injustice? Hear him on the Cross:

Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

In Luke's telling of the story, Jesus then is appealed to by one of the criminals at his side and he offers him deep assurance – in a word, “All will be well.” And, as life ebbed,

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

In the horror of crucifixion, Luke pictures for us a Jesus, full of grace, forgiving those who are executing him, full of compassion for his fellow sufferer, full of trust as he commends his spirit to God whom he conceived of as Father.

Grace, compassion, trust – what a way to go!

I bring that to your attention because we witnessed in Rich the grace to let go as death approached. Obviously the circumstances were totally different – Rich having lived fully until his death, surrounded by loved ones at home until less than two days in the hospice unit waiting, still hovered over by those he loved and who loved him.

How does that happen? Let me suggest it was no accident, neither for Jesus nor for Rich. One does not suddenly come to one's end and decide to die well full of grace, compassion and trust. Such a death is the result of a lifetime – a lifetime of love and care, faithfulness and devotion, loving and caring for family and friends – and look at his beautiful family – positive living in community, giving oneself in service and generosity, trust in the God of Grace.

God and faithful devotion and commitment to the community of faith. That was Rich's way. With him it was a steady, quiet way.

As I sat with him that day when he asked if I would do his funeral, he told me the story of the snowball that went awry and his “punishment” from his Christian School teacher – memorize the 91st Psalm. He was amused to tell me that the key verse for the teacher was verse 8:

“You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.”

I suspect having to recite the Psalm before the class gave his classmates the opportunity to see his punishment.

But, humorous as that is, the teacher's sentence forced him to memorize the Psalm and I'm quite certain that Psalm shaped him –

Did he not live “in the shelter of the Most High”?

Did he not “abide in the shadow of the Almighty”?

Did he not live with deep assurance?

“Under his wings” he found refuge.

In a word, Psalm 91 formed him, shaped him. And being thus shaped and formed, he lived well, fully and, as death approached, he had the grace to let go.

As I have indicated, our conversation at the dining room table was so easy. I said something about his obvious peace as he asked me to do his funeral. I can still see him look at me calmly and say, “I’ve been preparing for this all my life.” And he had and that’s why I entitle this meditation “The Grace To Let Go As Death Approaches” and insist it is not an end-of-life decision – it is a lifetime of preparation. I was moved by his quiet statement. He could let go not in futile resignation but in deep trust that the best is yet to be.

Contrary to St. Paul’s contention that death is the last enemy, I sensed Rich entered into death’s shadow with full assurance and trust. St. Paul was really better than the “death is enemy” claim. He goes on in that 15th chapter of I Corinthians to speak of his resurrection faith and there, I sense, he too views death not as punishment, an enemy, but part of the natural process – birth, life, death – and death the gateway to life eternal:

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable...

For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

To live with such hope and trust is not to deny the reality of death, not to deny loss, grief, and pain. And such hope and trust does not mean we would not choose rather to live on in health and fullness. It is rather simply to recognize life has its natural end in death and the sting of death, the fear in the face of death, is removed for those whose lives have been marked by trust and grace, love and hope.

For such, there is a grace to let go as death approaches, in the assurance that as they have lived to the Lord, they die to the Lord, as St. Paul affirms, concluding,

So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.

It is for us to deal with the grief of loss even as we thank God for the gift we’ve shared in his life – but Rich is just fine, experiencing wonders he never dreamed of.

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray.

Prayer

For these few moments, O God,
Sacred Mystery of our lives,
Creative Source, Eternal Presence, and our Final Home,
grace us with awareness
that we are held in the embrace of Love
as family and friends
and the one we have loved and lost awhile.

We remember him – larger than life –
adored by family, loved and respected
by a network of friends and a broad community.
So much was he of Spring Lake, the Village,
the school's athletic association –
a true Laker deep down.

Quietly touching many lives with kindness and generosity,
faithful in family, church and community –
solid, one we could always count on.
The stories that bring laughter and tears
bespeak hidden humor, a delightful spirit.
He loomed large in our lives,
leaving an emptiness in our hearts.
And yet, even in the pain of loss,
remembering him, he brings us to laughter and delight.

O God,
we are grateful that he graced our lives,
that he lived fully, choosing to live well until the end approached,
which he met with deep assurance and grace.

We are grateful, O great Mystery of life,
that we have been graced with a fundamental trust,
that this cosmic dance into which our lives are woven
is not a tale told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,
but a universe whose grain is Love,
Whose end is Life and Light

And in such a time as this,
in such a place as this,
Gracious God,
we are grateful above all
that the end is not broken health and dreams unfulfilled,
swallowed up in death,
but rather the confidence that
to live is to live unto the Lord,
and to die is to die unto the Lord,
so then whether we live or die,
we are the Lord's.

You uphold us with everlasting arms.
You overshadow us with a gracious Presence.
You bear us up on eagle's wings;
beneath your sheltering wings we find refuge and peace.

Sacred Mystery of all being, of our being,
consciously aware of our lives in your light,
we worship.
We know that all will be well,
all will be well,
all manner of things will be well.

Now, while our hearts are open, our spirits tender,
mantle us with Your gentle grace.
Assuage deep grief; cover our guilt;
heal us, O God; heal us now.

And now, as Jesus taught us, we pray,
*"Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever.
Amen.*