

Life Through Dying

An Article By

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“Life, what a beautiful choice!” So goes a commercial for pro-life in the culture war over abortion. The ads are tastefully done featuring beautiful children frolicking in idyllic scenes of delight. Fair enough as long as it is recognized at the same time that there are also children born into horror whose existence is to be marked by dehumanizing tragedy.

Recently I have been, as pastors often are, thrust into the drama of real life-and-death choices. Not choices about whether to bring a fetus to term but, rather, whether to keep a body alive by means of medical technology. Three times within a four-month period I walked with families through the anguish of making the decision to let go, to allow a loved one to die. The three had been my people over many years; they were dear to me, as were their families as well—spouses, children, grandchildren. In periods of five days to ten days I watched and waited with the families. The experience was as filled with beauty as it was filled with anguish. The bonding of children and grandchildren in solidarity with a parent or grandparent was moving. Thankfully, in all three cases there were living wills in order, and the desires of the person in question were clear. Those desires were honored. The deceased had, while in good health, chosen not to be sustained in a less-than-human condition. Two of the three died in the hospital; the third had been sent home to die.

During the five-day vigil at the home, we watched life ebb. The two grandchildren stood on either side of the bed, rubbing their grandfather’s arms, intensely monitoring each labored breath. The love was palpable. After a time, I went to this dear man and took his hand. In his ear I spoke the benediction. I spoke his name, asking him, if he were able, to squeeze my hand if all were well. There was a feeble but certain response. I kissed him and left. Within a couple hours he entered that eternal light.

It struck me then, as it had in the hospital earlier, that in honoring his choice to die without radical intervention, he (as they) had in actuality chosen life.

Of late I have been preparing a series of sermons on the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. Israel's wisdom teachers were careful observers of human experience. With clear-eyed candor, they recorded their observations of how life really is, not how we long for it to be. Their legacy is the wise counsel of sages who have discerned a way that leads to well-being. Their teaching contrasted the way of wisdom that leads to life and the way of foolishness whose end is destruction. The challenge is to choose the path of wisdom, thereby finding life. Choose life!

In an early writing, *In Man We Trust*, Walter Brueggemann says,

The man of Proverbs is not the servile, self-abasing figure often urged by our one-sided reading of Scripture in later Augustinian-Lutheran theological tradition. Rather he is an able, self-reliant, caring, involved, strong person who has a significant influence over the course of his own life and over the lives of his fellows. (118)

Thus the challenge of the Deuteronomist:

... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.... (Deut. 30:19)

The human person as understood in the wisdom tradition was both capable and responsible to choose wisely and thus to find the way of life.

I had never spent much time with the wisdom literature. But in preaching from Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes I have become aware of a rich vein of biblical teaching that calls the human person to maturity, to take responsibility for one's life by making responsible choices, choices that at either end of life's spectrum are choices of life and death. Paradoxically, I am realizing that a choice for death sometimes means a choice for life.

In the current cultural war raging on questions of abortion and euthanasia, one hears that life is sacred, God's gift, and thus that it is wrong to abort a fetus or to end a life of irremediable and terrible suffering. These are exceedingly complex matters and simplistic slogans will not do. But, that we are called to make very difficult choices cannot be denied.

The question is not whether life is sacred; it is. Life is God's gift. But the more we understand about the mystery of human existence, the more medical technology makes possible intrauterine procedures and life-sustaining measures at the end, the more incumbent it is upon us to make choices that lead to life, wise choices made upon careful, serious reflection and discussion before the face of God.

One sometimes hears the argument that life is a continuum from conception to death. Biologically, that is irrefutably true. But is biology the measure of life? Is that the life spoken of by the wisdom teachers? If so, then there will be no real

choices to make. But if life involves more than biological reality, if life involves also some quality of humanness—humane existence—then, given what is possible through the advancement of medical science, the choice for life will demand serious thought and prayerful contemplation. And the choices will be made, not simply regarding the immediate subject whose situation calls for decision, but the larger implications touching the others immediately involved, indeed, the community.

Resistance to making decisions and taking initiative is a refusal to be responsible and accountable as a human person, a human society before the face of God.

I found the wisdom literature a strange new world in the Scriptures. As Brueggemann points out, at first blush it may seem that wisdom threatens the traditional idea of God's sovereignty. Not so. What is at issue is not whether God is sovereign but, rather, the tenor of that sovereignty. It is not the more traditional sovereign who appears angry or at least grudging.

The sovereignty of God affirmed in wisdom is that of a God who accepts the legitimacy of his rule and therefore the legitimacy of the freedom of his human subjects. (119)

The church has too long kept people in spiritual adolescence rather than calling them to maturity, to decision making grounded in honest observance of human experience, cultural development, and growing insight into cosmic reality. In Brueggemann's words, the church has fostered a kind of piety that

“places it all in God's hands” and an understanding of prayer which looks blindly to God for guidance and answers. Too often this is a not very subtle form of copping out so that we don't have to make our own choices and exercise responsibility. (20)

Life is a beautiful choice—life as humane existence. To choose for life is sometimes to let go, to let die, in the confidence that in life, in death, the Lord and Giver of life will never let us go.

Reference:

Walter Brueggemann. *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith*. John Knox Press, 1973; Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006.