

“DEATH IS A DOORWAY”

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Fifteen years ago clergy friends and I walked through a graveyard in St Andrews, Scotland. Surprisingly, we found witty, lively verse in that somber, grey setting. One 16th century gravestone read, “Here lies Martin Elginbrod/Have mercy on my soul, Lord God/As I would do, were I Lord God/And you were Martin Elginbrod.”

Most people go to St Andrews for the golfing. Can you see us pastors giggling in cemeteries? I realize it is odd, an oddness I’ve learned to cherish, actually. After all, Easter is all about laughter in a cemetery...Other gravestones also tickled us. “Here lies my wife in earthy mould, who when she lived, did naught but scold. Good friends, go softly in your walking lest she should wake and rise up talking.” Out of fairness, let’s hear some dry, subtle wit from the other side: “She lived with her husband 50 years and died in the confident hope of a better life.” Or here is a last one: “Beneath this stone lies Dr. John Bigelow, an atheist dressed up with no place to go.” If only he had met our Jon Bigelow, a Bigelow with someplace to go.

Humor in the face of death impresses me. It conveys a silent grasp that yes, we must all face death. But *death doesn’t have the final word*. Cheer, even absurdity in the face of death, defy our natural human fears of annihilation. As we feel jittery confronting the fact of death head on, humor helps us sidle up to it. George Bernard Shaw, himself a famous atheist, observed: “Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh.”

Recalling Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, anticipating his suffering and death, today I want to speak of death as our doorway to God rather than a final wall. With Jesus walking through that door before us, it allays our fears and rallies our spirits. Whether we dread death’s finality goes far to shape our despair and hope now. Friends, we are not meant to live cowering in fear. Fear is the beginning of all sin. Of course, most settings forbid any talk about death, never mind wielding humor.

Brian MacLaren claims there might be four or five dominant stories that circulate worldwide. But in our environs, we hear but two. The story to which we subscribe and which renarrates our lives makes all the difference in how we carry ourselves.

Story one goes: once upon a time, the universe banged into being for no obvious reason and with no obvious purpose. Someday it will end and no one will ever remember that it ever existed. In between, we live and die. So have a nice day. Woody Allen famously supports this approach. “Mankind faces a crossroads,” he wrote. “One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.” Ah, humor, again!

Humor aside, the natural consequence of living out this first story is cramming all of the enjoyment we can into limited days. That’s how we get silly bumper stickers

like, “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” Conversely, in this first narrative we fear pain and avoid darkness as they detract from enjoyment. By the way, I’ve nothing against enjoyment. Neither did Jesus. I just prefer mine minus the despair. Surface happiness salving fear against annihilation is one fragile way to live.

Another problem in the first story is as we avoid life’s predictable tests and trials, we never develop the repertoire of habits and responses that we call character. And without character, we become superficial, whiny, harried, and disillusioned in our human days. We’ll even end up wishing for another life than the one we have been given. Not very helpful. Without character, faith is flimsy and unconvincing.

Story two says behind the mysteries of the universe is a Creator who gave things design and purpose. This Creator cares intensely about all he has made, most especially you and me. This God reaches out to us in many ways, more than we often notice. Last week we talked about seeing these signs through eyes of faith.

But amazingly, this Maker doesn’t force any of this on us. Something called freedom ever hangs in the air. We respond to God or not--our call. Our Almighty God--behind all that is--lets us choose him or not. Our Supreme Creator respects us creatures enough to give the option of relating to him or not. Theologians have a word for it: grace. It is like the grace of great leaders who would never consider wagging their power in our face or holding it over us. Of course, freedom also means a great, yawning opening in creation through which lovely *and* ugly things creep in. So if you’re a big freedom fan, that’s great, but don’t forget its downside.

When we die, we enter into the presence of our Creator who in that moment we know more fully as our Redeemer. So in a sense, this life is a prelude to another fuller dimension of life, that never dies. Our faith has always described this world as the proving ground for what is eternal. And, incidentally, by eternal life, I don’t mean “pie in the sky.” It can be grasped *now*. Within this story, trust looms large.

From these all-too-brief descriptions of the two major narratives driving life in the West, I hope you will see the peace of taking seriously and living into the second. We can live in ways that embrace life’s full truth and shake off the cringing of life spent in denial. Yet we can maintain a lighter touch, not feel the need to take ourselves so seriously, and maybe even fashion snappy poetry for our gravestones.

I saw this in my father’s parents, their incredible lightness of being, commending life’s fullness to me with deep gladness, even handing me the torch of life as they sensed their own light about to be extinguished. Having lived 85 years on a farm outside Cass City, Michigan, these Mennonites both died at home within 3 weeks of each other. I will never forget them and what they modelled. I was a callow young fool then, yet still wise enough to tell myself, “I want what they are having.”

Friends, you’ve known others who wanted to give you this gift, to sneer at death. Hidden under their humble grace rests a bedrock faith foundation to face anything.

Soren Kierkegaard is one of the greatest theologians who ever lived. I know that in college freshman philosophy classes we hear how he founded existentialism. But sharing MacLaren's second narrative, in a prosperous Christendom that had grown numb and immune to it, was his consuming and overarching purpose. He is extremely difficult to read. He wrote quickly because he knew life wouldn't last.

First, he wrote pseudonymously as a grab-all-the-gusto-you-can pleasure hound, in the style of story one. Then he wrote pseudonymously as a moral man, an upright man, a respected man--what I call *genteel religiosity*. People adored these books. Then SK revealed his real identity as a Christian, calling his former works hoey. His final writings urged people back to 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' People felt so exposed by this, they hated him. Everyone vilified him. A rag called the Corsair was the People magazine of his day. Cartoons of Kierkegaard ridiculed him. How complete was that character assassination? Even today, mothers in Denmark tell stubborn sons, "Now don't be a little Soren!"

He went after blowhard bishops. He ravaged clergymen grown too comfortable. He exposed theologians more into impersonal abstraction than God's promises. He debunked philosophers like Hegel who were playing speculative little games. He was so committed to his authorship, he broke up with the one lady he loved, Regina Olson, rather than expose her to all of the vitriol and hatred he faced. He devoted every fiber of his being to this life purpose until he was utterly exhausted.

One night he was at a party. He stood alone because no one willingly stood with him. He went that eve feeling unwell. But he was passionate, not the type to cower alone at home. He collapsed and died the next day, age 42. As he fell, the glitterati ran over to him to view the spectacle he had become. They propped up his head. "Just let it lay here," he advised, "the maid will sweep it up in the morning."

I speak in a personal vein this morning. I am telling you about Christians whose words and deeds have helped me understand death as our doorway unto God. The pastors I work with, my grandparents, theologians who make my heart race. What did they all have in common? Pointing to Jesus as the pioneer of our faith.

We see him in action in today's Gospel. Actually, what we see is the quickening of hatred toward him as he represented love and goodness in their purest forms; and how he refused to return anger with anger, evil for evil and hatred for hatred.

Yes, he had he doubts in the garden of Gethsemane. He was deeply distraught. He was human. But once he was arrested, facing tormentors, enduring beatings and all types of abuse—while it was unbelievably painful—he was also at peace. He trusted God not to abandon him despite all the countervailing evidence of the moment. And he remembered who he was. In all this, we glimpse Jesus' divinity.

I began in Scotland so why not end there also, a poem from George MacDonald:
Our old age is the scorching of the bush

By life's indwelling, incorruptible blaze.
O life, burn at this feeble shell of me.
Till I the sore-singed garment off shall push,
Flap out my Psyche wings, and to thee rush.
Amen.