Sunday, August 28, 1983
HOW TO DEAL WITH DEATH (NO. 1 IN A SERIES)
Luke 12:13-21

You and I and every human being we know and love will die. We can try to deny it like the man who told his wife, “If one of us dies, I’ll go to Paris.” Death comes to every living thing. However, human beings are the only creatures we know of that can think about our own deaths and the deaths of others.

As I was preparing this sermon, I made a list of all those individuals that I have been especially close to during my life who have died. All of these, with the exception of one, were relatives. The list came to eighteen people. Thus, I have personally experienced the death of a loved one eighteen times since I was about six years old. That’s an average of two and one-half persons a year.

Those who died included a brother, my mother, four grandparents, two great-grandparents, a sister-in-law, a brother-in-law, four uncles, three aunts, and the wife of a minister colleague. I mention this only to underscore strongly the point that death is something each one of us must deal with, whether we want to or not. It cannot be avoided. In addition to coming to terms with the death of those close to us, we have to come to terms with the fact that we ourselves are going to die.

In addition, as a pastor I have been involved in dealing with the deaths of hundreds of other people — infants, children, young people, old people, those who died of natural causes, accidental deaths, suicides, murders, and illnesses. And I have been at the bedside of numerous people when they died.

Fortunately, in the past ten years or more, in this country in particular, we have been trying to come to grips with the inevitability of our mortality. More books have been published on the subject of death and dying in the past ten years than ever before. Discussions have been held in schools and colleges. Last spring I was asked to lead a discussion in a junior high class here in Lincoln on the subject of death and dying.

More realistic and open attitudes toward death are coming about. What is perhaps feared more than death itself is the process of dying. Some die in loneliness amid strangers and machines in a hospital or some other institution. Demand is growing for the “right to die” with dignity when the time comes. In order that this might happen with people who are terminally ill, the “hospice” movement is growing in this country. A hospice is a warm, secure place to die amid friends and family when further medical treatment is considered pointless. In a hospice, individuals aware of their impending death can live out their last days free of pain, and family members can be present as much as possible over a period of time.

Years ago, before modern medical treatment and before there were very many hospitals, and the life expectancy of human beings was not nearly as long as it is now, many people died at home, and members of the family and friends had the experience of being at the bedside or near someone who died. Even young children were present.

Now because we have eradicated the scourge of infectious disease and the life expectancy rate has continued to lengthen, and because death is more likely to be caused by cancer or some other chronic degenerative condition, the dying person is often taken care of in a hospital

or other institutions, and death is not witnessed so much by the family in the same way, except, of course, in the new hospice movement just mentioned. The point is that death is now more separated from the rest of society than it used to be.

“This is the first death-free generation in the history of the world,” said Professor Robert Fulton, a sociologist who heads the Center for Death Education and Research at the University of Minnesota. By that he meant that for the first time the vast bulk of youngsters now reach age 21 without having experienced a death in the family. Of course, children do sometimes witness the death of pets. I can remember officiating at at least six funeral services for guinea pigs who were pets of our oldest daughter when she was a child.

Because death is more separated from most of us, there is a tendency to deny it or avoid it or fear it, and we even may find ourselves treating people differently if we know they are dying. In an experiment a few years ago, a researcher asked mature individuals to interview a man who they were told was a hospital patient. Some were informed he was merely sick and others that he was terminally ill with abdominal cancer. Those that thought he was only sick reacted warmly to the patient. The others seemed to be repelled, avoiding eye contact and shrinking away from the dying patient. This was true even for those individuals who expressed open attitudes toward dying on a questionnaire.

We do often try to deny death or avoid it, and that’s the first thing we have to admit in dealing with death. Notice how some people do not like to say the word “death” or “dying.” Rather, we say he or she is deceased, has expired, departed, passed on, or is asleep. Once we can admit that we are going to die sometime and are able to talk about it, then we have made a good beginning in dealing, not only with our own death, but with the death of the ones we love. This does not mean we will remove the shock or the grief, but we will be able to get through it.

Secondly, it is helpful to talk about our fears in regard to the death of others and our own death. To have some fear about death and the process of dying is normal. Perhaps, as someone said, our fear of death is really our fear of life — a projection of our failures and problems. Jesus said, “Whoever would save his or her life will lose it, and whoever loses his or her life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:25)

But we are afraid to lose our lives, to give them away. We want control. We do not want to surrender our control over ourselves and others, our mastery of our circumstances. We want to play God. Thus, in the parable, which was read as our scripture lesson, the man thought he was in control of all that he had. He would build larger barns; he would say to his soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “Fool, this night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” In other words, you are not in ultimate control of your future and your destiny. And if you think so, you are a fool.

So death is often feared because it destroys our illusions of grandeur. It is the ultimate defeat of self-control. When we die, we are all equal.

We also fear death because our lives are incomplete. We want to do things we haven’t yet done. If we have children, we want to see them grow up and settled in a life of their own. We want to know our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We want to fulfill our goals and ambitions.

Death also means being separated from those we love and from those who love us.

We not only fear the loss of life, but the process of losing it. We don't want to suffer, and we don't want to see others suffer a long, painful process of dying. Another fear in the process of dying is indignity, for dying can be a painful and undignified process. It may also become a burden to others. It can become a financial burden, as well as an emotional burden. The dying person may draw out feelings of sympathy, tenderness, and love, but also of pity, repulsion, hatred, and guilt.

Punishment after death is another fear for some. It has been long enlivened by religious visions of hell. The angry and the guilty are most afraid of being punished. The degree of our hostility in life helps determine how much we fear punishment after death. We all make mistakes. None of us lives a perfect life. For those who cannot find and accept forgiveness, death is the bitter end, or an even more bitter beginning.

We also fear the unknown, and there is always a mystery about death. It is perfectly natural to wonder about what happens to us after death. Often those who fear what comes after death are those who cannot face the unknown in life. They lack the spirit of adventure. Any surprise immobilizes them. I have always liked the reply of the husband who, when his wife asked him where he wanted to be buried after he died, Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, replied, "Surprise me!"

The important thing to remember is that our problems in dealing with death are often closely related to our problems in dealing with life. Death is most feared by those who are withdrawn from others, who are consumed with hate or guilt, who are too dependent or independent, too ashamed, or too proud.

Looked at positively, those who welcome life are also those who can welcome death as well. Psychological studies have shown that persons living at the peak of happiness have no fear of death. At the moment of highest joy, death is neither feared nor ignored, but often embraced. Those who are afraid to die are those who do not enjoy life enough. We should ask ourselves, "Under what conditions would I accept my death as a joyful conclusion to my life?" Our answer could offer a reason for dying and also an orientation for living.

Remember, Jesus Christ said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." The emphasis of our Christian faith is on life and not on death. The empty tomb is our ultimate symbol. This does not mean, of course, that we deny or avoid death, but it does mean that we look at death and are able to deal with it in a new way when we believe that true life, eternal life, begins here and now.

Another way to say it is, "Life in paradise with God begins in the here and now, and not just after death." We believe that God's spirit revealed in Christ lives as much in us in the midst of our lives as at the moment of death. To be a Christian is to be discovered by God in our present places.

When we live with the sense that God's spirit is in us and guiding us and a part of us, then we are no longer so afraid. And along the way, there are many gifts. There is the freedom that comes from not being anxious about our lives. There is also the humility that comes from the fact that we know that one day we will die. There is the delight that comes from a new awareness of the preciousness of life.

In short, when we take account of the fact that we are going to die one day and prepare for that inevitable moment, then we will begin to see our life differently. There will be a noticeable

shift in our priorities, an intensive soul-searching for new meanings, and the use of our energy for what is really important in our lives.

Death makes life precious. We begin to realize that in one sense the two least important details are usually inscribed upon our tombstones — the dates of birth and death. We will not be remembered for the length of our years, but for the breadth of our sympathies for others, the depth of our appreciation for beauty, and the height of our love.

A little boy confused his nighttime prayer. He said: “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I live...” The real tragedy is to die before you live.

One woman said, “Having to face the fact that my husband is dying makes us value our love with an intensity and intimacy that we had never known before. Each day becomes a gift to experience together — no longer do we take our relationship for granted.”

The living God we worship is the Lord of both life and death. Because life and death are connected, we live in love. It is said that when the poet Goethe was about to die, he cried, “Light! The world needs more light!” Years later a philosopher responded, “Goethe was wrong. What he should have said was, ‘Warmth! The world needs more warmth!’ We shall not die from the dark, but from the cold.”

Not all of us will be able to choose the way we are going to die. Some will die accidentally, some suddenly from no apparent cause, some after a long and lingering illness. Some will simply die from old age, like the one man in our church who was over 90 and had never been seriously ill or in a hospital for any reason. He went to bed one night and died in his sleep, and he happened to die in the same bed in which he was born.

Others, when they know that death is not far off because of a terminal illness, have a different experience. Then the one who is dying and the family can prepare for it and be together so that it becomes a beautiful and unforgettable event. Such was the case with a man in this church and his family not too long ago. His family gave me permission to tell the story this morning. I do so because I think it was a beautiful way of dealing with death.

The physician had advised the patient and the family that if he was removed from the respirator, he could live no longer than 24 hours. Rather than living the remaining days of his life tied to a machine, in consultation with his family, he decided it was all right to die, and they agreed.

The hospital was helpful and sensitive to the situation. He was moved out of intensive care into a private room where his family could be with him the last hours of his life without interruption. He was also told that he would be given as much pain-killing medicine as he desired so he could be as comfortable as possible the last hours of his life.

His last hours were spent in peace and rest, quite different from the struggles to breathe of the previous days and weeks. I was able to be present off and on during the 24-hour period, as was Jane Ellefson, who is singing here this morning. She was then a part of the chaplain’s staff at the hospital. She had become quite close to the family during the patient’s hospitalization. Jane was asked to sing the song, “Amazing Grace.” I said prayers of thanksgiving for his life and the life of his family. The family and the person dying were able to say things they felt about each other. They were able to comfort each other, to touch each

other, to cry together, and to laugh together. It was a time of sadness, but also of celebration. As predicted, he died within 24 hours, and he died peacefully and with dignity.

Those of us who were privileged to be present also knew we were in God's presence and had taken part in a very precious experience. It was truly a time of thanksgiving for his life.

As Christians, we can deal with death with sadness, thanksgiving, and celebration, and God is with us in all of them, and in both life and death. Amen.