Sunday, November 9, 1986
DEATH IS NOT ALWAYS AN ENEMY
Romans 8 (Selected verses); Luke 20:27-38

As most of you know, my father died a few weeks ago on Saturday, October 11. He was 87. For the past several years, he had not been in the best of health and was confined to a nursing home. He spent much of his time in bed and the rest of the time in a wheelchair. His hearing was not good, nor was his eyesight, although his mind was strong and his memory sharp. He had, however, lost interest in living and was ready to die. Sometimes he said as much. He was ready for death whenever it came. With his age and in his condition, death was a friend, and not an enemy.

We six children and our stepmother, with the consent of our dad, had all agreed that so-called "heroic measures" should not be used to keep him alive. In the event that his heart stopped, he would not be rushed to a nearby hospital. If his breathing stopped, he would not be put on a respirator. He would be kept as comfortable as possible but would be allowed to die. And that's what happened. He died peacefully. Death is not always an enemy.

I thought of my dad when I was reading an article in the local newspaper not long ago. The news article was about a medical ethics forum that was meeting here in Lincoln. The keynote speaker was a professor at the University of Iowa School of Religion and College of Medicine. He said the request, "Do all you can for mother," can be an indecent remark in today's world of advanced medical science that can prolong a person's life far longer than her dignity. He went on to say, "Sometimes if mother is dying slowly from an incurable illness, or just from old age, 'do what's appropriate for mother' would be a more humane request." Again, death is not always an enemy.

This summer, I was visiting an elderly woman in one of our hospitals. She had little or no immediate family left and few friends. She had outlived most of them. She told me that she was ready to die, and then she asked if it was all right for her to feel that way. I did my best to assure her that it was all right. Death is not always an enemy. Each one of us will die someday.

Yet, as a society, we have a preoccupation with the preservation of physical life which seems, at times, to be based on an assumption that death is unnatural or that its delay, even briefly, through medical and technical means, is always a triumph of human achievement over the limitations of nature. It is as if death is in every case an enemy, a kind of demonic power to be overcome by the forces of life, propped up by elaborate medical technologies. Every delay in death is seen by some as a victory by the forces of good.

However, there are times when resuscitating a person in the final stages of dying can be a positive violation of a person's right to die with dignity. Death is not always an enemy.

Dr. Lewis Thomas said, "We have as much distaste for talking about personal death as for thinking about it. It is an indelicacy like talking in mixed company about venereal disease or abortion in the old days. Death on a grand scale does not bother us in the same special way. We can sit around the dinner table and discuss war, involving 60 million volatilized human deaths, as though we were talking about bad weather. We can watch abrupt bloody death every day, in color on films and television without blinking back a tear. It is when the numbers of dead are very small and very close that we begin to think in scurrying circles. At the very

center of the problem is the naked cold deadness of one's own self, the only reality in nature of which we can have absolute certainty, and it is unmentionable, unthinkable."

"We may be even less willing to face the issue at first hand than our predecessors because of a secret new hope that maybe it will go away. We have come a long way in our technological capacity to put death off, and as more disease is conquered, we may prolong life even more — but each one of use will still one day die."

It is not true tat we only die because we get sick with on lethal ailment or another so that if we did not have our diseases we might go on indefinitely. Everything around us dies — not only we human beings — trees, plankton, mice, whales, flies, mitochondria. In fact, flies do not develop a ward round of diseases that carry them off, one by one. They simply age and die like flies.

Most of us, I'm sure, if we had our choice would like to live long, healthy, vital lives and then one day simply die of old age in our sleep. I remember one funeral I had here in this Church that was like that. The man lived to age 92. He had rarely been ill throughout his life. He had never been in a hospital except to visit others. One evening he went to bed and died in his sleep. His family told me that he had in fact died in the same bed in which he had been born. Death is not always an enemy.

Sometimes, of course, death is an enemy. We are not meant to die as babies, or as young people, or in accidents, or from disease. We are meant to live fulfilling, useful, healthy lives. Good health is our natural state. Disease or sickness is unnatural. But death is natural in old age. Death is normal in that none of use will live forever in this life.

In reading over my family's family tree again this past week, I was struck by the number of infant deaths and deaths of small children due to disease. My great-grandparents on my father's side had 13 children, three of whom died as infants. My great-grandparents on my mother's side had eight children from two different mothers, because one mother died; of the eight, two infants died, and three other children died within a two-week period because of scarlet fevers — one was 10 years old, one seven, one four. This took place February 6-19, 1904.

Disease is an enemy and we are making progress in overcoming childhood and other diseases. I believe we are also making progress in our attitudes toward death so that we do not artificially prolong life just for the purpose of prolonging it.

Early in 1986, the American Medical Association broke new ground when it approved the right of doctors to withdraw life-supporting artificial feeding systems from hopelessly comatose patients. The AMA Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs stated: "For humane reasons, with informed consent, a physician my do what is medically necessary to alleviate severe pain, or ease or omit treatment to permit a terminally ill patient whose death is imminent to die… Even if death is not imminent but a patient's coma is beyond doubt irreversible, it is not unethical to discontinue all means of life-prolonging means. This includes medication and artificially or technologically supplied respiration, nutrition or hydration."

Death is not always an enemy. Dr. Lewis Thomas claims that we may be about to rediscover that dying is not such a bad thing after all. Sir William Osler took this view; he disapproved of people who spoke of the agony of death, maintaining there was no such thing.

As a matter of fact, we are having new opportunities to learn more about the dying process from increasing numbers of cardiac patients who have been through the whole process and back again. Thos who remember parts or all of their episodes do not recall any fear, or anguish, but rather an overwhelming sense of calm and peace.

In a recent study of the reaction of dying in patients with obstructive disease of the lungs, it was concluded that the process was considerably more shattering for the professional observers than the observed. Most of the patients appeared to be preparing themselves for the equanimity for death, as though intuitively familiar with the business. One elderly woman reported that the only painful and distressing part of the process was in being interrupted. On several occasions, she was provided with conventional therapeutic measure to maintain oxygenation or restore fluids and electrolytes, and each time she found the experience of coming back harrowing. She deeply resented the interference with her dying.

Now let's connect all this business about death and dying with our Christian faith.

First of all, according to our faith, death has never been an enemy. Death is a part of life. All of us will one day die. Jesus taught that we should always take this into account and not forget it, not as a matter of fear, but of reality. Jesus knew that always taking our own death into account as well as the death of those around us puts life into a new perspective. Our life on this earth, even if we live to be one hundred years old, is but a tiny part of eternal life.

At the same time, the awareness that we will one day die can heighten and fine-tune our sense of the present moment. If I told you that you had only one year to live, you would see all of life in a new way.

Secondly, although our faith tells us that death is not an enemy, Jesus never minimized the pain that comes from being separated from one another. We are told in the Bible that when Jesus' close friend Lazarus died, Jesus wept. Although death is a part of life, it is painful for those of us who are left behind when someone close to us dies. All separation from those we love is painful; death is the ultimate separation. The pain involved with the separation of death is more intense when someone we love dies at a young age. That's what makes the death of a child, a young person, or a person in the middle of life so difficult.

The thought of separation from those we love can also be painful for the one who is dying, especially if it is a younger person. If I knew I was going to die tomorrow or within a short time, I would be very sad because of the separation that would go with it. I want to continue to be with my wife and my children and my friends in this life. I want to see my grandchildren grow up, yet I know that I cannot live forever. I cannot hold onto these people or anything else in this life forever. Yet some people act as if they can. All things come to an end eventually, sometimes before we want them to and sometimes when we are ready for it.

My dad knew that. He was ready to be separated from us. He had given us what he could during his life. He was ready to release us and ready for us to let him go. Sometimes people who are about to die are more ready to leave us than we are to leave them. Earlier in life, when our children are ready to leave home and be on their own, the same is true. They are more ready to leave us than we are to let them go. The Bible reminds us there is a time to live and a time to die.

And this leads directly to our third point. Point number one was that Jesus taught us that death is a part of life and we are always to take our own death and that of others into account. Point number two: Jesus at the same time never minimized the pain that comes from separation.

And the third point is that our faith reminds us that even though death takes us out of the only world we have known and separates us from the joys and goodness of this world, since God is the beginning and the end of all of us, then for a Christian, death takes us into an even closer relationship with God. We can see death in this larger context. We do not deny its sorrow, and we are keenly aware of its loss, but our faith in Jesus Christ remembers his words: “In God’s house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you.”

Death is not an enemy; it is the threshold into a new life and a new relationship with God and with those who have gone before us. As Jesus pointed out in the scripture read earlier from Luke’s gospel, in the life after this life, there is no marriage or giving in marriage. He was saying that it is a totally new existence and not just a continuation of this life.

We are promised that everything is made new in the life after this life. All the old aches and pains are gone. The physical defects or deformities that may directly cause our death are no more. The limitations we put up with in this life are removed. The baby that dies because of an incomplete brain in the life after death is made whole. In that sense, death is certainly not an enemy but a friend. Death heals all our diseases and hurts.

That’s what St. Paul was saying when he wrote: “I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Savior.” Amen