Sunday, September 10, 1989
DEATH AND THE MEANING OF LIFE
Luke 12:16-21

Here's a true story about a young man, age 30. I don't know his name. But three times a week or more, this human being comes close to death. He looks much older than his age. A number of years ago, he was told that his kidneys were failing, so he has been taking dialysis treatments three times a week.

In the city where he lives, he works with the Youth Commission. A few weeks ago on a Monday night, he was at the Drug Council working with young people and their drug-related problems. He was giving his time and efforts to others. He feels that once you have accepted the fact that you're dying, you may as well fill your life with living.

So, he was at the Drug Council when he discovered that his muscles wouldn't work — he couldn't stand up. Some people from the Drug Council rushed him to the hospital, which was several miles away. But before dialysis could be started, his heart stopped. They resuscitated him, and he was in the hospital for a few days before he came back to work with the young people.

He looks kind of funny. The powerful drugs he has to take make his hair fall out in patches, so he has shaved his head. Fad and fashion don't mean much to him — so he dresses the way he chooses. A lot of people think his clothes are odd. They are. Many people say he looks a little frightening. He does. Some think his attitude about death is different. It is.

Don't misunderstand. This young man is not any great hero. He is simply an individual who comes very near to death quite often. He goes to the dialysis center to be attached to a machine for several hours at a time. To be an appendage to a machine, to know that your life depends on stainless steel tanks and a few yards of plastic tubing — this is living death.

Yet this young man has found a way of living with death. Each day brings its own cargo of cares. Diet has to be carefully controlled. He must live within a reasonable distance of the machine on which he is dependent. Medications must be taken in careful dosage and at prescribed hours. It doesn't sound very much like he's free. But he is.

He is free because his way of living is to fill each of life's moments with meaning. He is free because he is not afraid of death. He has found a way to be useful to other human beings. He works with young people because he likes and understands them. After they get beyond his strange appearance, they seem to like him too. He has a brilliant mind. But he has told the young people with whom he works nothing about his physical condition. They don't know about his frequent trips to the hospital. He is simply one human being relating in love to other human beings. He does not suffer the illusion of immortality.

What would be your reaction to this situation? Would you be filled with self-pity? Would you always be trying to wring that last ounce of self-gratification out of every precious second? Would you always be looking out for number one? Would you have no time for others and their cares and worries? Or is this the way you are already living?

Jesus told a story about another man. This man, as far as we know, had no unusual health problems. He had everything in terms of material possessions. He was a rich farmer. He had

so much that he didn't have room to store it all, and he was highly pleased with himself and his increasing wealth.

Furthermore, because he was wealthy, he also thought he was wise. In fact, he thought himself so wise and so deserving of all that he had, that he couldn't imagine ever dying and having to leave it all behind. He was convinced that he could plan every part of his life to his satisfaction — after all, he was in control. He could even decide how and how long he was going to live. He could have written that popular book of some years ago, Looking Out for Number One.

This man fell into the trap of thinking that he was a self-made individual, that he needed no one else, and that he was responsible to no one or for anyone.

So, he decided that he would build larger storage barns and keep all his wealth for himself. Then he could pat himself on the back and say, "I certainly have been a good person all these years. I deserve all that I have. Now take it easy, eat, drink, be merry."

But God said to this man, "Fool, this night your soul is required of you. So, what good are all these things to you?"

Note especially, God called this rich farmer "a fool." He was a fool for several reasons: because he thought he was a self-made man; because he thought he had no other responsibilities other than to himself; because he failed to take into account that one day he would die like all the rest of us — rich or poor. He refused to think about the fact that he would one day die. He thought that what he had was all there was.

We human beings are quite different from the animals and insects in creation when it comes to the matter of death. Nature treats death as a normal, everyday occurrence. An octopus lays a million eggs to produce one surviving offspring. Flies, buzzards, bacteria, and many other creatures build their careers around the fact of death.

Only we human beings treat death with shock and revulsion, as though we can't get used to the reality, universal though it may be. Every human culture devises elaborate ceremonies to mark the final passage of a human being. Even those of us in the Christian West, with our traditional belief in an afterlife, dress up our corpses in new clothes, embalm them, and bury them in airtight caskets and concrete or steel vaults to slow natural decay. In some of our practices, we act out a stubborn reluctance to this most powerful of human experiences.

Yet it is when we take our own death into account that we begin to understand life. If there were no death in front of us, we would probably not ponder the meaning of life, because there would be nothing to concentrate our minds. If there were no end to look forward to, either with fear, hope, or resignation, we would live with less self-consciousness, and perhaps life would have less meaning.

Death limits our lives and makes them precious to us. Death also makes our lives mysterious. What kind of being is it that can reflect on its own life, its origin, and its end and then cease to be?

The brevity and preciousness of life, the fact of death, and the ability we have to reflect upon the meaning of our own existence all combine in most people to produce a mood or disposition that can be called religious. And people who are religious arrive at the conviction that the world

as we see it and know it is not all there is — that there is always more than there appears to be.

What then does our Christian faith have to say about death and the meaning of life?

First of all, Jesus reminds us in this parable and in a number of other places that there comes a time in each person's life when our soul is required of us. The one inevitable fact of our life is our death. We always live on borrowed time. That's why Jesus told a number of other stories similar to this one, all reminding us to take into account the fact that one day we are going to die and we do not know what day or hour that will be.
This does not mean that we are to be all the time preoccupied with the fact of our death, but simply that we are always to take that fact into account.

To say that one day our soul will be required of us is another way of saying that God is in ultimate control of our lives. We did not bring ourselves into the world. We do not own any part of creation. We will not take anything we think we own with us when we die. We are finally responsible to God and through God to others.

Unlike the rich man in the parable, the young man with the kidney disease was always fully aware that one day he would die. Therefore, he was also aware that each moment in his life was a precious gift, an opportunity.

Suppose for a moment that each one of us lived in this way — always conscious of the fact that we are dying. How different our lives might be. Maybe we would be more kind and loving to one another. Maybe we would not give eternal value to things that do not have eternal value.

Some of the most beautiful people I've had the privilege of knowing over the years have been those who have terminal illnesses. Because they know they are going to die, even though they don't know when, they have been able to let go of hate and guilt and have been able to love others unconditionally.

Death makes life precious. We will not be remembered for the length of our years, but for what we did with those years for others. A little girl confused her nighttime prayer. She 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.

Chaim Potok, in his book The Chosen, has a father say to his son, "Human beings do not live forever. We live less than the time it takes to blink an eye if we measure our lives against eternity. So it may be asked, 'What value is there to a human life? What does it mean to have to suffer so much if our lives mean only the blink of an eye?' I learned a long time ago that the blink of an eye in itself is nothing. But the eye that blinks — that is something. A span of life is nothing, but the individual who lives that life, he or she is something. We can fill that tiny span with meaning so that its quality is immeasurable though the quantity is insignificant."

Secondly, it is important to remember 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, by those who are stingy, selfish, and greedy in this life, and by those who are consumed with hate or guilt. They are afraid of death because they are afraid of life.
Looked at positively, those who welcome life are also those who can welcome death.
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. Ask yourself this question, “Under what conditions would I accept my death as a joyful conclusion to my life?” Your answer could offer a reason for dying and also provide a meaning for living.

Or ask yourself this question, “What will people remember about me after I die? What in a positive sense will the minister who officiates at my funeral be able to truthfully say about me?”

Here’s what one woman wrote in poetic form:

One day my life will end; and lest
Some whim should prompt you to review it,
Let her who knew the subject best
Tell you the shortest way to do it:
Then say, “Here lies one doubly blest.”
Say, “She was happy.” Say, “She knew it.”

Thirdly, remember Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.” The emphasis of our 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 in this life.
Another way to say it is, life with God begins in the here and now, and not only after death. We believe that God’s spirit revealed in Jesus lives in us in the midst of our lives and also lives in us in our life after this life. In fact, it is our belief as Christians that after this life, after passing through death, we will be in a relationship with God in a new way, and that we will be with God forever. Amen.