Sunday, November 26, 1995
FINDING MEANING IN LIFE AND DEATH
Romans 8 (selected verses)

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose. What then are we to say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God who did not withhold the only Son, but gave him up for us all, will God not with him also give us everything else? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through God who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The elderly man was propped up in bed. He had been confined to his bed for more than a year, and he knew there was no chance of any improvement in his condition. Each time I came to visit, we usually started our conversation in the same manner: the health of our families, the activities of mutual friends, how the church was doing, the weather, and if it was during the football season, Nebraska football. But when we came to the end of this awkward cheerfulness, he would always ask the same questions: “Why am I still here? Of what use am I?”

Each time my friend asked me these questions, I realized that even though I have good health, a vocation to which I feel called by God, and much to look forward to in life, these same questions are on my mind from time to time. Why am I here after all? Am I making a difference for the good in people’s lives? What meaning can there be in life and in death? Do you find yourself pondering such questions as these?

And then someone told me about another man, 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 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 his dialysis could be started, his heart stopped. They resuscitated him, and he was back 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 the meaning of life and 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 if you were in 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 moment? 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. We don’t know his age, but apparently, he had no unusual health problems. He had everything in terms of material possessions. He was a rich farmer. He had so much he didn’t have room to store it all, and he was highly pleased with himself and his increasing wealth. He wouldn’t think of giving any of it away.

Because he was wealthy, he also thought he was wise. In fact, he thought that he was so wise and deserving of all that he had that he couldn’t ever imagine 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’ve written that popular book which was published some years ago — Looking Out for Number One.

So instead of giving anything away, he decided that he would build larger storage barns and keep all his wealth to himself. Then he could pat himself on the back and say, “I certainly have been a good person all these years. I deserve all I have, now take it easy, eat, drink, have fun.”

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 man 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 the same as all the rest of us.

We human beings are different from the animals and insects in creation when it comes to 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. In some of our practices, like the ancient Egyptians, we act out a stubborn reluctance to this inescapable end.

Yet it is when we take the death of others and our own death into account that we begin to understand life. If there were not 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 consider, whether in fear, hope, or resignation, we would live with less self-consciousness.

Death limits our lives and makes them precious. 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?

What then does our Christian faith have to say about finding meaning in life and in death?

First of all, our faith tells us that death is not an enemy, but is a part of life. All of us will one day die, and Jesus taught that we should always take this into account and not forget it, not as a matter of fear, but of reality. Taking our own death into account, as well as the death of those around us, can help us put life into the proper perspective. The awareness that one day we will die can heighten and fine-tune our sense of the present moment. If you were told that you had only one year to live, you would see all of life in a new way.

Unlike the rich farmer in the story which Jesus told, 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 one day we will die. 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 have no 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.

This does not mean that we are all the time to be preoccupied with the fact of our death or the death of others, but simply that we are always to take it into account.

Second, according to our Christian faith, 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 those who are consumed with hate or guilt. These are the persons who often sit on the sidelines of life, on the balcony, and only observe and never join in the journey. They are afraid of death because they are afraid of life.

A little girl confused her night-time prayer. She prayed, "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.

Looked at positively, those who find meaning in life are also those who can find meaning in death. Psychological studies have shown that persons living at the peak of happiness, who

feel their lives are counting for something, 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.

Those individuals who find meaning in life and in death are also those who have come to know, as taught and lived by Jesus, that God has implanted in each one of us something sacred that is unique. In the tapestry of life that God has designed, there is a place that you can fill.

Oftentimes the problems of the world seem so large that you probably wonder if there’s anything of value that one person can do. Then you have to remember that you are not expected to do everything, but only your part.

In addition, remember the fact that because you stand for something good with integrity, it can be as important as anything you do. If you want to find positive meaning in life and in death, ask yourself, “What do I stand for? What do I symbolize?”

My friend, the elderly man I described in the beginning of this sermon, even while confined to his bed and dying, was a symbol to others; the people who came in contact with him knew him as a person of integrity. It is an awesome thought to realize that as a symbol, you are influencing others without even knowing it.

According to our Christian faith, there is yet a third thing that gives meaning to our life and to our death. It is the promise of God that in spite of the pain which comes to us when someone we love dies, death is the threshold into a new life and new relationship with God and with those who have gone before us.

We are promised in the life after this life that everything is made new. All the old aches and pains are gone. 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. Death heals all our diseases and hurts.

That’s what the Apostle 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.