

'More Than Words'
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
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based on Acts 9:36-43 and John 10:22-30

Benjamin Franklin is credited with saying: "There are only two sure things in life....death and taxes."

Taxes are an inevitable fact given we live within a governmental structure that operates and funds its goods and services out of the financial support of its people. I don't think anyone enjoys paying taxes, but not many of will say we are willing to give up many of the services our government provides in exchange for those taxes.

But relax! This isn't a political sermon about the evils/benefits of taxation; it's certainly not an endorsement/condemnation of the current presidential race; or even a bewildered lament of what the world is coming to.

This sermon is in fact more about the inevitability of death...and any conversation about death really isn't about death, but about life.

In our first hymn this morning we sang how (as Easter people) the "fear of death can no more stop us from our pressing here below." As Easter people we believe Jesus' resurrection is evidence of God's great love for us that doesn't end even when our bodies give out.

Over the last few months, Covenant has lost some dearly beloved members in battles lost to illness or old age. We mourn their passing and miss their presence with us.

Death is the one great mystery we only know from our lived experience. In other words, it is only in life that we know anything of death.

Do we fear death because it is the great unknown? Or do we not fear death itself, but we fear the approach to death or what it will mean for our loved ones?

Over and over again the Bible tells us, "do not be afraid." As a matter of fact, that is the focus of the celebration of life service for Betty Bierer this afternoon.

God does not want us to live in fear about what happens after death...so much so, (we believe) God sent us Jesus to take the fear and sting and trepidation out of death. Indeed, it was Jesus who teaches us to live this life in the full goodness and mercy of God so the thought of uniting human beings with God removes all fear.

But what about the ones left here to mourn?

After my father died and my mother was struggling to carry on without him...she often said it was a good thing she worked in a hospital because every day she could see other people in much worse shape than she was in. Witnessing other's struggles and helping them through it lessened her pain and fear of the unknown future.

Neale Donald Walsch wrote a series of books about his conversations with God. In his final book called, 'Home with God – In a Life That Never Ends', he says this:

"It is impossible to live or to die without God, but it is not impossible to think that you are. If you think that you are living or dying without God, you will experience that you are. You may have this experience as long as you wish. You may end this experience whenever you choose."

I think of Neal Donald Walsch as a kind of spiritual existentialist. His understanding of God is of a unification of human kind with the divine. Walsch believes "we are all one with God and one with life, in a shared global state of being."
[Wikipedia] (which helps explain his above statement)

I'm not sure how quickly I will become a disciple of Neal Donald Walsch, but I do believe his approach to understanding death is a direct reflection on how one embraces life...and how one lives into a one's faith in *who God is*.

Today's scripture readings help us in grasping an understanding about death and life.

We first heard the story of a faithful disciple named Tabitha...a woman who was devoted to good works and acts of charity. Tabitha becomes ill and dies. Friends surrounded her, blessed her body for burial, and pay tribute to her by offering testimonies of her generosity and selfless endeavors that helped them in life.

Then they summoned Peter.

You notice, in the story, the people were not asking Peter to bring Tabitha back. They merely asked for Peter to come without delay.

Why?

Remember, this was in the early, early days of the Jesus movement. Jesus was expected to return *any day* ...and their beloved sister and friend Tabitha (faithful disciple, a beloved one who overflowed with good works) died before Jesus' second coming.

The community needed Peter's blessing to come to terms with the fact Tabitha would not be there when Jesus came back to save them.

...and Peter does a remarkable thing! He prays her back to life!

That for me is the clue to bridging the understanding of death and life. It relies on us grasping the closeness of God in both life and death.

Maybe Neale Donald Walsh is close when he says: "we are all one with God and one with life, in a shared global state of being."

...and we experienced that shared global state when we pray and place our full trust and faith in God.

Just for a moment, let's explore what would happen if we looked at the story of Tabitha a little bit differently? What if Tabitha wasn't an individual person as much as a community...a community of faith (or body of Christ) who overflowed with good works and acts of charity?

...and what if...that community (or body) died. They become ill and give up. They retire from doing good works and acts of charity??

It would take Peter, the rock on which Christ built the church to resurrect that community faith and restore them...breathe new life into the people, filling them with faithfulness, mercy and gifts of grace.....all through the act of prayer!

If in death, we reflect how we lived life...then life and death are linked in a deeply spiritual way and new life is always possible when we no longer fear death.

New life is the power of Jesus' resurrection truth. That truth breathes new life into the body through the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is very much evident in the church of Jesus Christ and those who profess faith in the resurrection power because it is God who has the power to say 'no' to death, and 'yes' to life....forever life...living eternally in the presence of God.

When we read the scripture reading from John, we heard Jesus saying, God and Jesus are one.

What we have here, from a faith perspective, is More Than Words. It is a faith perspective that says what you do, how you live, who you engage, and where you place your trust is the essence of life.

As individuals? Yes! But also for the church body as well.

...and because your earthly life is accomplished through Jesus...and his ethic of love and justice...it is a life that does not end.

Death cannot conquer the unity of spirit we share with God through Jesus Christ.

Betty Bierer had figured this out. We will talk more about that this afternoon. Thanks be to God! Amen!