

Homily – Dying Is Safe

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Today, during Lent, I want to talk about death. Which means, I need to start with a few death jokes. What did the calendar say on its death bed? My days are numbered.

The Coronavirus has been copying the Black Death. It is plaguearism.

At his death bed, Achilles realized that they were going to lose the war and uttered his last words. Defeat hurts.

And finally, death is always right around the coroner! Not very good jokes are they?

Now, two thousand years ago, the Hebrew people were desperate for a savior. They wanted a king and a warrior that would free them from the oppression of the Roman Empire and lead them to the ancient glories that they had with King David. They wanted to reclaim the promises that God Almighty had made to Abraham and be a great people. They wanted to have power and gain the whole world, but as we heard in today's Gospel reading, Jesus crushes these worldly hopes. He explains that hardship and death are not going to end. In fact he says the rewards will be given to those who accept the death of this adulterous and sinful way of living. And if this wasn't hard enough to swallow, Jesus tells his followers they are going to have to accept death, even death on a Cross. This is a message that is still relevant to us today. As followers of Jesus, you and I need to accept our own mortality, for you see dying is safe.

We spend a lot of our time and energy on denying death, and by extension we are a people who pretend we don't need the wisdom of Jesus. Accepting death is something many of us think can do when we are older, not yet. However, most of those who have achieved wisdom, have accepted death and have stopped being afraid of it. Maybe these wise people have seen a lot of death. Maybe they have outlived their friends and loved ones. Maybe they have experienced the process of dying so frequently, that it has become familiar. Often we become less afraid of things that are familiar. God created us to lead beautiful lives, and God created us to die. Death is not something that is outside of God's control. It is intentional and deliberate. Fear of death is optional, but death, itself is certain. Be assured dying is safe.

Now if you are a wise one who has already accepted death then my words over the next few minutes are going to feel familiar, and they will re-enforce what you already know. If you have not accepted death don't shut out my words. Listen to them. Wrestle with them. See if you can let some of these words inside of you. I know that

you want to accept death, and internalizing some of these words will move you along in your journey towards wisdom and union with God.

I have been reading a book about the spirituality of dying by Kathleen Dowling Singh, called *The Grace in Dying: A Message of Hope, Comfort, and Spiritual Transformation*. Kathleen is a wise one who has been with many as they are nearing death and then go into death. She has written two other books called *The Grace in Aging* and *The Grace in Living*, but *The Grace in Dying* is her best known work. I want to read you the introduction to Kathleen's book.

“This is not a book for a time of imminent crisis. This book was not written to be read if death is very near—a few hours or a few days or a week away. If you are the one who is facing death this soon, put the book down. And know that you are safe. If your loved one is facing death this soon, put the book down. And know that your loved one will be safe. Dying is safe. You are safe. Your loved one is safe. That is the message of all of the words here. Know that you are safe. All these words are just to tell your mind that you are safe. If you are dying, your mind will come to know this soon. So, go and rest or go and pray or go and meditate, so that when you begin to enter the realms of the sacred you will resonate with those realms gently. If it is your loved one who is dying, go and be with and cherish and comfort your loved one. Speak softly and hold lightly and let him or her know that dying is safe. Pray or sing or meditate with your loved one; so that as he or she enters realms beyond this one of bodies and words, your loved one is fully opened to Spirit, and you will also be attuned to the mystery where you and your loved one are forever connected. If you have some more time, this book can, I hope, speak to you about dying. It can, I hope, speak to you about what dying has to do with living and what living has to do with dying. It reveals that there are levels of awareness, of being, of Spirit, that transcend the personal consciousness we tend to think of as our self. It reveals that dying, remarkably, is a process of natural enlightenment, of finally coming home to our true self. It charts how we gradually open to deeper levels of our being, how we remerge with the Ground of Being from which we once emerged. This book is based on observations and experiences gained after hundreds of hours at the bedsides of those who were dying. It is based on the words the dying people in those beds spoke to me. These observations and experiences and words reveal an apparently universal process of transformation inherent in death itself: the grace in dying. This book does well with some time to contemplate its implications. The natural processes leading to dimensions of Spirit are our deathright. They are our birthright, as well. This book was written to be read as awareness grows of a coming end to our physical existence as well as in the midst of life.”

One of the things that I like about this book from Kathleen Singh is that it gives a great sense of comfort. Yes, accidents and diseases are still horrid, but as you read

her book you get a sense of just how normal dying is. For those who have not been around death very much, this book helps to defuse some of the mystery of dying.

It has been said that death is a set of two mirrors. The first is a mirror in which all of life is reflected. When we look into this first mirror of death and dying, we get a clearer image of ourselves, a clearer image of the inherent possibilities of human consciousness. We can recognize that death is as beautifully conceived as every other part of life. We can come closer to accepting the fact that part of the experience of physical existence involves the organism's natural design for death. God created us to die.

Now, the process of dying helps us move beyond our sense of self, to see that we are connected to all other things. Nearing death, people begin to manifest the quality of merging. There is an end of separation. We let go of the duality of the false self. This suggests that in finally coming face-to-face with God, we recognize that we are looking into a second mirror. With this second mirror we see that God is already in us and around us.

The nearing death experience is a spiritual transformation, and it is a universal process marked primarily by the ending of the body and a separate sense of self. Instead we have the ascendancy connectedness. The nearing death experience occurs anywhere from several weeks to several days or even hours or minutes before death. This unique spiritual process appears to be a sequence of increasingly higher or deeper levels of consciousness, each more enveloping than the next, through which each of us passes as we complete our experience in the human body.

Also, as one is nearing death there is a sense of the end of struggle. There is a letting go, or what author Thomas More refers to as "the emptying of self into the fullness of life." People have described this as a process as effortless as that of an ice cube melting into a glass of water. It is a change in state, and a return to that which it already is. The process of dying has been described as a clearing of oneself out of the way so God can fill in. The medieval Christian monastic tradition refers to this centered interiority as a threshold, or a liminal experience. This interiority appears to allow, facilitate, and nurture the path to the beyond and reunion with God.

Bishop Mary used to speak of the nearing death experience as a holy time. And when we approach a person who is nearing death we feel like we're entering holy ground. Many of us who work with the dying, and we get a sense of the sacred as the dying person's awareness moves closer and closer into the great mystery at the edge of life and death.

Kathleen Singh's book also talks about how we can achieve some of these benefits of dying while we are still in the midst of living. She points out that grace is the common thread linking dying, contemplative practices, and spiritual growth. Let me say that again. Grace is the common thread linking dying, contemplative practices, and spiritual growth. Grace is that unearned gift of love that we have from God. Grace is what we are to reflect back into our lives so that we can start living the way that God has created us to live. We can experience this grace by paying attention what is already surrounding us.

In my current online class on Celtic spirituality and mysticism, we are studying the great 14th century book, "The Cloud of Unknowing." This book reminds us that the path back to union with God is the emptying of self. The wisdom of Jesus that we see in today's Gospel reading is about this same path back to God. It is the path in which we accept our mortality, and it is a path that includes a set of contemplative practices that allow us to engage with the transformative power of death, long before we die. The first step on this path is to pay attention to the present moment. The path will have us accept the suffering that is part of life, but we will also embrace the blessings we already have from God. We will become aware of the things of this world that keep us separated from God and others. We will pay attention to Christ who is all around us and in all things.

It is easy to joke about death, and in this way we can ignore death a bit longer. However, dying is safe, and I invite you to an early acceptance of death while you are still in the midst of life. May you claim your birthright and your deathright by leaning into the embrace of God's grace that already surrounds you.