

"THE TIMES OF OUR LIVES"
III. To Die With Dignity

INTRODUCTION It was last Summer that the papers reported the plight of a hospital patient in Florida. An older woman, suffering from an incurable rare disease of the blood, required continual blood transfusions, administered by an unusually painful method. The woman pleaded with her family and her doctor to discontinue these torturous treatments. The doctor, torn between his compassion for the patient and a commitment to a medical code, took the case to a judge. And the judge handed down a decision in which he said, "This woman has a right not to be hurt. She has a right to live or die - in dignity".

So far as I can recall, this is the first time that I had met that wedding of words - "to die in dignity". Ordinarily we do not associate death with dignity. In our time, we have been witnesses to a great deal of death without any hint at all of dignity - the Jews in German concentration camps - the soldiers and the civilians in Vietnam - the victims of violence in our own country - the very aged and the very ailing fading away in institutions. O death - where is thy dignity?

OUR OWN SQUEAMISHNESS There are still deeper reason, I think, why we decline to clothe death with dignity. Suppose we look at some of them. First off, there is our own squeamishness about the subject. Strange, isn't it, that a society that prides itself upon its open-ness and its frankness is so furtive and so phony in the way it deals with death.

We really don't like to talk or to think about the subject. Some of us have trouble in saying that a person has died. We prefer to use such phrases as "passed away" or "passed on". Hospitals record the death of a person with the word "expired". This is symbolic of our difficulty in being honest about death.

Families sometimes play games with one another in the shadow of death. Like the family that summoned a psychiatrist to talk to a terminally ill aged mother. Said the son to the psychiatrist upon his arrival at the hospital, "We must lie to mam, we must play the clown and cheer her up" - adding that this was the only way to keep her from becoming depressed. The astounded doctor proceeded to the bed of the patient and found the patient to be quite cheerful. A few moments of conversation with her revealed that she had known for some time that she was dying, but didn't want to admit it to her children. "I let them kid me because it makes them feel better", she said. Doctors, nurses, ministers, friends - for all of their ministry of supportive help are frequently part of the game. They have difficulty in facing the death of a person and so contribute to the isolation and loneliness of one who may know fully well that he is facing death.

And when death actually occurs, we still continue with the game of pretense. We pay large sums to an undertaker to embalm a body, dress it up in fine clothing, display it in an attractive coffin, surround it with flowers. I have no argument with the undertaking profession; most of its representatives I've known have been kind, decent men. They're simply a part of "The American Way of Death" which all of us share in shaping. And too much of that way has been surrounded with fear, furtiveness, silence and pretense.

So, if people are to die in dignity and with dignity, it begins with our own attitudes and open-ness and honesty. It begins with the acknowledgement that everyone must die, that no one is an exception, and that any sensible foresight about life includes some expectation and some preparation for the fact of death. The Bible is so completely realistic here as elsewhere: "There is a time to be born, and a time to die". "The days of our years are threescore and ten, or even by reason of strength forescore...yet, they are soon gone and we fly away"

We do well to acknowledge the fact of death - to face up to it - talk about it with our loved ones - not in any morbid preoccupation with the subject, but in the same way that we talk about college, marriage, vacation, retirement plans, wills, or anything else that looms up as part of our future.

I think we should get down somewhere in writing our mutual plans or individual desires - not in rigid, inflexible fashion, but simply as suggestions to survivors who in love can be trusted to make final decisions. I've seen families flounder because there seemed to be no place to start, and worse yet, I have seen families feud, because an aunt from Oshkosh did not like the decisions that were made - whereas some simple statement in advance would have reduced the floundering and the feuding.

Tastes and preferences of people differ with regard to every aspect of life. So in death there is no reason to insist on uniformity in customs, or to look askance if someone chooses another way than ours. Only let there be some planning and choosing at some other time than the immediacy of grief. How a person feels about cremation or burial, embalming, viewing, the question of a funeral or a memorial service, the degree of expense, the place of burial, the question of unlimited flowers or some memorial cause in lieu of flowers. Why should we be so reticent about discussing these and then describing them in a directive of love? There is much more hope that people will die with dignity when people come more openly to discuss the subject with dignity. As a few of you know, I can personally be of some assistance to you on this sort of thing and perhaps be one of the holders of your directives in this regard.

SCIENTIFIC AND MEDICAL PROGRESS

I think a second modern obstacle to death "with dignity" - quite paradoxically - is our scientific and medical progress. On the one hand, we have succeeded in prolonging life and delaying death, but on the other hand, often in the process we deny death with dignity.

I remember once standing outside of a hospital room where I had gone to visit a patient while teams of doctors and nurses and fleets of equipment sailed in to cope with a case of sudden heart failure. At length, the doctor came out and walked over to where I was standing and lighting up a cigarette said with an air of triumph, "Well....we pulled her through. We have her heart going again". Knowing some of the lonely circumstances that surrounded her life, I wanted to say then what I often did say to myself in the long, pitiful stretch that followed, "why"....

Writes Dr. Joseph Fletcher, the sometimes controversial theologian and now Professor of Ethics at the University of Virginia's Medical School:

"Today's dying patients die comatose and betubed and sedated and aerated and glucosed and non-compos mentis. It has come to be a pretty ugly business. Maybe this is the price we pay for our increased medical control over the conditions of dying".

Granted: this represents no simple ethical and moral decision for a physician. Under the Hippocratic oath, a doctor has promised both to preserve life and to relieve suffering. But increasingly - he may find the two goals to be contradictory, and then: what course of action is he to follow?

There was an interesting article in the Wall Street Journal several months ago that was passed on to me by one of the members of our church. You may have read it. It had to do with EUTHANASIA - which is defined as "the act of inducing death for merciful reasons". It's a complicated and controversial subject, full of legal,

medical and moral knots. For instance, on the one hand, some of us who favor euthanasia, in principle, run into a roadblock in the acknowledgement that if the decision is left to a doctor and to a family or even to the patient in the time of a deep crisis, even with some legal safeguards, the unscrupulous then may "make a killing" while the unthinking reap a harvest of guilt. Some of us, therefore, still have difficulty in turning over to physicians the right to actively induce death.

But this article contained what was to me a new and positive approach. It talked about "living wills" provided by the Euthanasia Educational Fund, by which a person still in reasonable mental and physical health, requests in writing that he be allowed to die if it becomes apparent that there is no reasonable hope for recovery - rather than be kept alive by machines or heroic measures. The "living will" states in part, I do not fear death as much as I fear the indignity of deterioration, dependence, and hopeless pain. I request the right to "die in dignity".

Such a "living will" is not legally binding, but once again - it is a statement of desire that can help remove the burden of responsibility and guilt from doctors and relatives who might feel compelled to choose prolonged treatment even when a person has entered into a kind of living death.

Who of us would not choose to "die with dignity?" I find nothing in such a concept that violates my religious principles. Prolonging life can be as much a usurpation of God's role as shortening life. To me the judge in Florida was speaking a thoroughly Christian word when he handed down the decision that we referred to at the start of the sermon: "This woman has a right not to be hurt....she has a right to live or to die in dignity". Perhaps he knew of that beatitude from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the merciful".

LACK OF FAITH Which leads us to the third and perhaps the most significant obstacle to "death with dignity" - namely, our lack of faith. Not just our generation's reluctance in facing the fact of death, not just modern medical progress in postponing the event of death, but basic to everything else: our lack of confidence in any significant meaning of death. This is not so much a sermon about life after death (that's for Easter), as it is a sermon about life before death. Wrote Samuel Miller:

"We know it is death which forces us to say what we believe about what comes before death....but if we can trust God for the journey through life, why can we not trust him as well for the journey through death".

Now granted: that kind of faith is not something that can be wrapped up in a little package and parcelled out to people in a sermon or two across the year. I think a man's faith about death - as about everything else in life - is very personal....the result of his own thinking, searching, exploring, accepting. For myself, I find my own measure of faith is nurtured time and again through the Bible in such steady and supportive words as those familiar phrases from the Psalms: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil...." Or in Paul's moving and majestic words: "I am persuaded that neither life nor death shall separate us from the love of God". Or, again Paul: "O death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be to God who gives us this victory". And back of it all is the encounter with death by Jesus on the cross who could say, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" - and subsequently demonstrated that something greater than the power of death was at work in that event.

Moreover, my own faith is strengthened when I have walked as far as I could with some people in the valley of the shadow of death. For many of them it has loomed not as a foe, but rather as a friend - not as an adversary, but rather as an adventure. And I shall never forget how some of them have walked through that valley. Perhaps you have known persons like that, like the doctor, for instance, about whom Dr. Sockman once wrote....ill 18 months with a terminal illness and a fellow doctor said this of him:

"Those who were fortunate in seeing him during those 18 months when he and death sat face to face - who dreaded their first visits, and came out gladly inspired with a new faith in the nobility and courage to which rarely men can attain - these knew that the ugliness and the cruelty of death were defeated. Death had no triumph, and he died as he had lived - with the simple faith of a trustful child, and the superb gallantry of a great soul and a magnificent spirit".

So - for some of us in our taller, better moments, at least, death does look like an adventure. We're in no particular hurry to get started on that adventure, for life, too, is an adventure, and if we have any choice in the matter, we should like to live out our days. But when we come to that time of our life which is death, we understand that "whether we live or whether we die - we are the Lord's". And as we face it, let us face it with the kind of faith expressed in these lines of the Indian poet, Tagore: "Death" he said, "is not extinguishing the Light. It is putting out the lamp, because the dawn has come".

We have glimpsed and been given a power beyond our own. We have marvelled at the miracle of creation - not only the wonder and mystery of seed-time and of harvest, but even the miracle of persons and the creator's infinite patterns for people. We have sensed and shared in love and hope and faith - and have known with a knowledge of the heart that there is substance to the word, "ETERNAL". We have felt a power become personal in our lives with grace and strength that we could never claim as self-generated. We have responded to the highest incarnation of that power in the man, named Jesus - and in Him we have found light and love enough for every step of the way - in life and death. In such moments, we understand that we can trust God for this journey of death and for whatever lies beyond - all as a part of his plan and part of his power.

I love that old Anglican prayer, and I would ask you to bow your heads as I close today's sermon with it:

"O Lord, support us all the day long of this life, until the shadows lengthen and the evenings comes, and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then in thy mercy grant us a safe lodging and a holy rest, and peace at last, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen"