

Having “The Talk”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 3, 2019—All Saints’ Sunday

- Genesis 49:1, 29, 32-33 (Good News Translation)¹ Jacob called for his sons and said, “Gather around, and I will tell you what will happen to you in the future....”²⁹ Then Jacob commanded his sons, “Now that I am going to join my people in death, bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite....”³² The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites. Bury me there.”³³ When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he lay back down and died.
- John 13:33-36 (Good News Translation)³³ My children, I shall not be with you very much longer. You will look for me; but I tell you now what I told the Jewish authorities, ‘You cannot go where I am going.’³⁴ And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.³⁵ If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.”³⁶ “Where are you going, Lord?” Simon Peter asked him. “You cannot follow me now where I am going,” answered Jesus; “but later you will follow me.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: All Saints’ Sunday reminds us to live not with fear of dying but with confident hope for this life and Life Eternal.

Recently I happened to tune in to an episode of the TV show “Everybody Loves Raymond.” I was in and out of the room, probably getting dressed or folding laundry or something, so I wasn’t following the story closely. What I picked up was that the two main characters Ray and Debra were sitting up in bed. She told him that if she died, she thought she would like him to date her friend Linda. Then she got a little miffed that he seemed so excited by the possibility. In turn, Ray said that if he died he’d like her to date his friend Pete. Debra objected to the suggestion, protesting that Pete was unattractive in so many ways.

How did it turn out? I didn’t stick around to see the whole episode. But I applauded the writers for their courage in using comedy to address an important topic. They addressed the reality that everyone—even funny, beloved sitcom characters—everyone will die someday. *Everyone*. I’m going to die. So are you. As syndicated newspaper columnist “Ellen Goodman... puts it, death rates remain at 100%.”¹

Today’s observance honoring the memories of our dear ones, our forebears, our ancestors in the faith... this observance is meaningful because death is a universal experience. It will touch each of us.

We may pretend that it won’t. Some decisions we make indicate a mindset that we’ll be around forever.

- We avoid talking about a world without us in it.
- We don’t raise the subject with those closest to us. Maybe we fear that even talking about our death will bring it on sooner, akin to how baseball players in the dugout won’t talk to the pitcher who’s throwing a no-hitter lest even talking about it would put a jinx on it.
- Maybe we worry that talking about death will upset someone.
- Maybe we’re afraid to imagine what medical or behavioral or financial difficulties we might experience in our final days or months or years.

¹ Donna Schaper, “Refuse to Pay the Worry Tax,” StillSpeaking Daily Devotional, ucc.org, July 10, 2014.

For so many of us, we avoid the subject altogether.

But today I want to talk about preparing for death because preparing for our eventual death affirms our faith in God. Healthy thinking and talking about death can help dispel any anxiety we may feel about our eventual demise. And we have biblical grounds for talking about death as a way of preparing ourselves and others for that eventuality.

Today's text from the Old Testament book of Genesis presents a scene featuring the sly old Jacob – father of all those sons including the famous Joseph of “Technicolor Dreamcoat” fame. Father Jacob knows that he's dying, so he gathers his sons around him and tells them what he has arranged for them. He concludes by giving them specific instructions for his burial so there was no question what he wants.

And as for Jesus, of course, he gave many instructions to his disciples, such as at the Last Supper when he told them to remember him whenever they ate and drank. Speaking to the disciples and the crowds in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus instructed them to lead lives free of worry about daily necessities because God knows what they need. Jesus pointed to the birds of the air and the flowers of the field as examples of God's assurance of care. And in today's passage from John's gospel, as Jesus prepared to be separated from his disciples by the aggressive actions of the religious and civil leaders, Jesus gave them specific instructions – a “new commandment” he called it – instructions to “love one another. As I have loved you,” he told them, “so you must love one another.”²

Yes, the Bible gives examples of faithful people talking about death in ways that are helpful to themselves and others.

Topics related to our eventual death are often grouped under the term “end-of-life issues.” There are a lot of issues, and that can be overwhelming. They can be complex issues, and *that* can be overwhelming.

In today's bulletin our Parish Nurse Cathi Patton shared an article mentioning four things you can do to have more control over your life and your end-of-life:

- 1) Durable Power of Attorney for Medical Care
- 2) Advance Medical Directive
- 3) Living Will
- 4) Do-Not-Resuscitate Order.

These things can be legally or medically technical, and most of us have not been equipped to make informed decisions by years of study in law school or medical school.

But you have to start somewhere. You can start by having “the talk.”

- “The talk” I'm referring to is not the conversation you have with your pre-adolescent about the functions and consequences of human anatomy.
- It's not the conversation about how to behave if you're stopped by a police officer.
- It's not the advice you give as you drop off your child at college for the very first time.

No, here's “the talk” each of us needs to have:

- “The talk” is about what kinds of treatments you do and do not want if you get sick and can't speak for yourself.
- “The talk” is about who you want to represent you when you can't speak for yourself.
- “The talk” identifies your preferences about medical procedures if your illness were to be irreversible and terminal.

² John 13:34

- “The talk” is about what funeral arrangements you would like.
- “The talk” is about what to do with your possessions when you no longer need them.
- “The talk” is about where to find your passwords to social media and online accounts, where to find insurance information and family records.

Who do you talk with? The obvious answer is to talk with the people in your home, in your family. But that’s not always practical. Families are ever more scattered; sometimes family dynamics are distant or combative, and that can make it near-impossible to have thoughtful, respectful, productive discussions.

You could talk with your doctors and nurses. They *want* to know what your wishes are; it helps them in planning their medical care for you. But of course they can’t help you with funeral plans or with will and estate matters.

Another place you could start to have “the talk” is at church. Perhaps there’s a friend you have here who you’ve grown to trust and even confide in. They care about you, but they also maintain a perspective, an objectivity that a family member wouldn’t have. You could talk with a church staff member: maybe me, or our Director of Christian Education, or our Parish Nurse, or someone else. The church can be a safe, comforting, supportive place to start talking about end-of-life issues.

Recently I learned of an organization called “The Conversation Project” which encourages people to take charge of end-of-life decision-making. The Conversation Project has free resources available online (and I have them now, too) that are really helpful in taking those first “baby-steps” toward talking about end-of-life issues and then making decisions about them. You can see a sample right inside the church office today.

Among the tools they offer is what they call the “Where I Stand” scales. Here’s how it works. A statement ends with two opposing positions, and you decide if you prefer one or the other or prefer somewhere in between. For instance, one of the statements is “*As I receive care I would like...*”

- then at one end of the scale: “*I would like my health care team to do what they think is best.*”
- at the other end of the scale: “*I would like to have a say in every health care decision.*”

For each such question you decide if you’d land at one end of the scale or the other end or somewhere in the middle. Even if you’ve never given it any thought before, this can help you start to see what kind of plans you would like to make.

If all this conversation about end-of-life planning isn’t overwhelming enough, I also encourage you to think about two other things. If you don’t have a will to indicate what you would like to have happen with your possessions and assets, the State of Ohio will make those decisions for you. Maybe that’s okay with you. But if not, you should have a chat with an attorney. If you don’t know who to talk to, ask your friends, colleagues, me – many people have attorneys they’d be happy to recommend to you. You don’t have to have all the answers before you meet with an attorney; she or he will help you figure out what answers are right for you. The October 27, 2019 edition of the *Plain Dealer* had a short article about easy ways to get started with the seemingly intimidating process of writing a will – I’ve posted the article on my office door.

The other thing to think about is how you would like your family and friends to memorialize you when you die. Our church provides a funeral planning guide to help you think through many of the questions that come up when planning a funeral or memorial service. You don’t have to fill in all the blanks all at once. But you could get started. Answer what you know, and then you can consider the options that remain. *Anything* you can indicate is such a relief to your family when they have to make your funeral arrangements. Give copies to your family,

your attorney if you have one, and especially give it to me; we maintain a file of funeral plans in the church office. And you can always update it at any time.

You don't need to have "the talk" right now. Maybe you're not ready. Maybe you need some time to warm up to the idea, to deal with some of your own emotions. The point is that we should not live our lives overwhelmed by the fear of dying, as this old story reminds us:

A doctor visited his patient who had just moved into a nursing home. As he prepared to leave, the man said to him, "Doctor, I am afraid to die. Tell me what lies on the other side."

Very quietly the doctor said, "I don't know."

"You don't know?! You, a devout Christian, don't know what's on the other side?"

The doctor was holding the handle of the door. On the other side came a sound of scratching and whining, and as the doctor opened the door to the hallway, the man's dog sprang into the room, followed by the man's son who had brought the pooch to surprise and comfort his father. The dog leaped up on the bed with an eager show of gladness.

Turning to the patient, the doctor said, "Notice your dog. He had never been in this room before. He did not know what was inside. He knew nothing except that his master was here, and when the door opened he sprang in without fear.

"I know little of what is on the other side of death, but I do know one thing: I know my Master is there, and that is enough. And when the door opens, I shall pass through with no fear, but with gladness."³

The point is that we should not live our lives overwhelmed by the fear of dying. As we remember especially on All Saints' Sunday, this glorious opportunity to live the lives we've been given in this wonderful world is only a small part of what God has in store for us. God calls to live not with fear but with confident hope.

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³ Anonymous illustration which I modified heavily from <http://epistle.us/inspiration/iknowmymaster.html> accessed 11/1/2019