

"Dying to Live"- John 12:20-33

They say there are three things that cannot be talked about: You know them, right? Religion, sex, and politics. I think they are wrong. We do talk about these things. We just do it really badly. There is, however, something we do not talk about. Death. Yes, we acknowledge death when it happens, but for the most part we do not talk about death with any real depth or substance, and certainly with no enthusiasm. We don't deal with it. We deny it. We ignore it. We avoid it. No one wants to die. The death of our loved ones is too real so we only reluctantly acknowledge death. The thought of our own death is scary enough. The relationships and parts of our lives that have died are too difficult. So for the most part, we just avoid the topic of death. Besides it's a downer in a culture that mostly wants to be happy, feel good, and avoid difficult realities. But death and funerals are a reality of living.

We read about people being buried with their favorite things such as a roll of dimes buried with Frank Sinatra so that he might be able to make a pay phone call in the afterlife. Some people are buried in their cars. Some people are buried with the ashes of their dog. Some people like my father are buried with a Paddington Bear figure his hand because he loved the Paddington Bear stories. The Pharaohs' of Egypt were buried with mistress, servants, gold objects so that they would not get lonely in the afterlife. Most funerals, however, are not about the dearly departed possessions. Instead, funerals are all about the memories, conversations, tributes, and photos that focus on relationships. Memorial services reveal that a person's character is more important than their cash value.

There are funerals that leave us feeling blessed and there are funerals that leave us feeling pained. No funeral is fun. However, I have conducted funerals that were warm, meaningful, full of wonderful stories of faith and love, and some humor. Most of the time I do not hear at funerals what a wonderful negotiator the deceased was at work. Most of the time I never hear that the deceased was a wizard at technology. But instead, what I hear, are the reflections about moments of kindness, generosity, availability, and courage that were found in the life of the deceased. There is always great agony when the service is for a

young person whose life was cut short. If we attend a memorial service with an attitude of respect and receptivity, there is much to gain. Honor comes in living and dying for something much bigger than ourselves.

We have been looking at bucket-lists. Most of us if not all of us have a bucket-list of places or things we want to do or accomplish before we kick the bucket. We hear about them and read about what people have put on their bucket lists. However, we have been looking at what God might put on our bucket-list. Two weeks ago, we looked at goals we set for our lives as a part of God's bucket-list for us, but we are to expect with God the unexpected. Last week we looked at the 10 commandments as being a part of God's bucket-list for us. The 10 commandments were given to us from a loving God who wants us to have these 10 laws to live a fulfilled and joyous life. This week I want us to look at death and that attending funerals should be on the bucket-list of every thoughtful individual. Not as some morbid hobby, but as a reminder of the value of life and the inevitability of death. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus was on to something when he said, "The art of living well and the art of dying well are one."

In the story, we read this morning, I suspect the Greeks in today's gospel did not go to Jesus expecting to talk about death. They just wanted to see Jesus. And who could blame them. Jesus up to this point had a great track record. He had cleansed the Temple, turned water into wine, healed a little boy, fed 5,000, given sight to the blind, and raised Lazarus from the dead. I don't know why they came to see Jesus, but I know the desire. Seeing Jesus makes it all real. We all have our reasons for wanting to see Jesus.

If you want to know your reasons for wanting to see Jesus look at what you pray for. It is often a to do list for God. I remember as a little boy praying for good grades in school. I remember also being nudged by God that I had to do my part by reading and preparing for class. When things get into shambles, mostly because of us, we pray that God will fix it all. We all know these kinds of prayers. We want to see Jesus on our own terms. We don't want to face the pain of loss and death in whatever form it comes. Sometimes we want something from Jesus more than we want Jesus himself. There is a real danger that we become

consumers of God's life rather than participants in God's life. We pick and choose what we like and want but we skip over and leave behind what we do not like, want, or understand. Christianity is neither a buffet nor a spectator sport. Christianity means participating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the message that Jesus gives to the Greeks when they come to see him.

Jesus told them, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

If we want to see Jesus, then we must face death in the face. If we try to avoid and deny death, we refuse to see Jesus. There is this temptation to skip over death and get to the resurrection. That is why during Holy Week we are reminded that death comes first. Death is the gateway to new life. Death is not always physical. Sometimes death is spiritual and emotional. As Shakespeare once wrote, "We die a thousand deaths each day." There are the deaths of relationships, marriages, hopes, dreams, careers, health, and even beliefs. Regardless of what this looks like this is not the end. There can be no resurrection without a death.

The unspoken fear and avoidance of death underlies all our, "What if" questions. "What if I fail, lose, or fall? What if I get hurt? What if I don't get what I want? What if I lose that one I most need and love?" Every "what-if" question separates and isolates us from life, God, and one another, and ourselves. It keeps us from bearing fruit. It keeps us from being that grain of wheat that Jesus told the Greeks.

Death is a gateway and the beginning of life and not the end. Regardless of who or what in our life has died, God in Christ has already cleared the way forward. We have a path to follow. Jesus' death is no benefit to us if we are not willing to submit to death, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Death means we entrust all that we are and all that we have to God. Jesus said we are grains of

wheat, however, through death we can become the bread of life. “Unless a grain of what falls and dies....”

So don't fear death. Live for something we can't hold on to and we will never fear death. Allow death and funerals to be on your bucket list. It will help us to see the value of life and the inevitability of death. Believe it or not, allow God to put death as a part of his bucket-list for us. Don't be afraid of it. It is the gateway into a life with God that will last forever.