

## PENTECOST VI

*We know that Christ being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.... Therefore, we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the Glory of God, so we too might walk in the newness of life.* Romans 6 : 9, 4

*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will find them.* Matt 10:28, 39

Our lessons for today are all hard sayings, as the disciples sometimes call what Jesus has to tell them. There's the story of Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar, Abraham's concubine. There's Paul's complicated and sophisticated, and mysterious, theology of death and new life in Christ. And then there's Matthew's list of Jesus' teachings about the life of a Jesus follower, the burden of which is that such a life will not be peaceful, comforting, conducive to family happiness, or even, perhaps, very long!

Whenever I prepare for a baptism, I always struggle with the meaning of the mystery of the sacrament. I have a solid idea of what it means for the community and for the family of the baptismal candidate – and the candidate him or herself at some future time– in terms of community. That is, I think I have a grasp of the pastoral theology of baptism. But what about the systematic theology? What about the meaning of baptism as it relates to God and Christ, to Creation and Redemption and Last Things and all those formidable categories?

A couple of years ago I came to a new understanding of baptism's meaning, and it had to do with this passage from Romans. I began to see that when we are baptized, we are given a new relationship not only to life, but to death. Baptism means, or should mean, that our lives are transformed. Our lives are re-oriented toward God. And baptism also means, according to Paul, that our deaths are transformed as well. In death, as in life, we are facing God.

Years ago, when my priest and mentor was dying, one of my sisters wrote me a note of sympathy. This was during her years in a Christian cult. She wrote, "St Paul is right. Death is the enemy." I took exception to this – as you know, I agree with Paul sometimes, but by no means always. I replied to her, "Death is not the enemy. Dying is the enemy." I was much younger then, a very new priest, and I wrote in the full pain and fear of losing my beloved friend.

And I have changed my mind and heart about what I wrote. I no longer believe that dying is the enemy, or that dying *has to be* the enemy.

This is tricky territory. I was surprised when my sister wrote what she did, because her theology as I understood it then dictated that everything happened according to the will of God. So how could death, a natural part of life, be the enemy? I believe that what Paul meant, what seems to be consistent with Paul's theology, is that it is not death but fear of death that is the enemy. Fear of anything, to Paul, is perhaps the enemy. He writes that *perfect love casts out fear*. But that's an ideal, a tall order for us mortals: to love so much that we fear nothing – *neither life, nor death, angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation*.

A tall order, so be so consumed by love that we are without fear. That's why it's tricky territory. Because in my experience one can be a faithful and committed Christian, a serious follower of Jesus, even a firm believer in the afterlife in a glorious heaven, and still be done in when stricken with a mortal illness. Moreover, one can be all of the above and be done in with the prospect of someone else's mortal illness.

And I'm not talking only about times when one's spouse or parent or, God forbid, child, is terminally ill. I'm talking about people who retreat from the approach of death in anyone they know. I think of my friend the Reverend Hugh Weaver, whom some of you remember, a man who spent his life in the priesthood, dealing professionally with the ill and dying on a regular basis. But when our mutual friend Eva was dying, he refused for the longest time to visit her in the hospital. He just couldn't face what was happening to her. Finally I nagged and shamed him into going, and from then on, he was a fine and faithful friend to Eva. But a lifetime of experience and faith could not protect him from his – as I understand it– fear of losing her.

And then I think of my daughter Liz, who adored Eva. The night that we knew Eva was dying, Liz asked to come with me to the hospital. When we got there, she asked Eva's son, who was in the room with her, to leave, so that Liz could say goodbye. I watched her through the door as she kissed Eva and stroked her head and told her that she loved her. Liz was fifteen. I'm not sure I've ever had a prouder moment as a mother. If I've ever had a sign that love casts out fear, that was it.

Faith is no guarantee, in my experience, that love will cast out fear. And lack of faith has not prevented countless gallant souls from facing death courageously. And it's

probably worth remembering here that courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to act bravely in the face of fear.

So what does it mean, then, to say, as Paul does *Therefore, we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the Glory of God, so we too might walk in the newness of life?* I believe it means that, with baptism, we are offered new possibilities, new potential, for transformation of life, and transformation of death, and, indeed, for transformation of dying. Because everything in the spiritual life is about possibility, isn't it? Everything is about potential.

Many contemporary theologians say that we are co-creators with God, partners in creating and sustaining life, partners in the work for justice and peace and love, the work that is the inbreaking realm of God. What does that mean? What does it mean to partner with God? Well, one thing I think it must mean is that when we are given the gift of grace, when we are given opportunities for transformation of life, or death, or dying, that we do our best to receive those gifts. Thomas Aquinas says this: *What is received is received according to the manner of the receiver.* That is, I take it, that the gift of love, the gift of courage, the gift of hope— these and so many of God's blessings are ours for the taking. How we receive them, and use them, is up to us.

And given my experiences with the ill and dying, I believe that God's boundless generosity makes these gifts available to believers and non-believers alike. Because I have certainly known people who lack belief in God, or who are skeptical about God, who have faced dying and death valorously and graciously. My own father was in that category. My sister, the same one who wrote me that death is the enemy, was looking, I think, for Dad's deathbed conversion. She asked him one day, very near his end, whether he believed in God. "That 's a very interesting question which no one has ever answered satisfactorily," he told her. That was vintage Dad. And yet, as I said at his funeral service, he was perhaps the most fearless person I've ever known. Not because he was a professed Christian, but because he loved life so fully that there wasn't much room in him for fear.

I read a couple of articles about death and dying in preparing for this sermon. One was an interview with the Irish journalist and memoirist Nuala O'Faolain who died very rapidly of cancer. I've read many memoirs and I tried to read one of hers years ago and couldn't get very far. What I remember thinking then is: *I don't like her attitude*, and this interview provided a sad confirmation that her orientation to life and death are deeply troubling to me. On her decision to refuse chemotherapy she said. "I don't want more

time. As soon as I heard I was going to die, the goodness went from life. “ How sad! And, I can’t help thinking, how wasteful! Because I have known people who seized the opportunity of approaching death to savor life to the fullest and to live it to the hilt. She also said, “I thought there would be me and the world, but the world turned its back on me, the world said to me that’s enough of you now and what’s more we’re not going to give you any little treats at the end. “

I do not want to pass judgment on a person I never met and whose hardships I haven’t had to face. But I do know that I hope and pray that when I am face to face with my own mortality, I do not feel and react as O’Faolain did. God has given me, through baptism, the grace of a different point of reference, a different approach to death and dying. I have been given the assurance that death has no dominion.

I have learned that about the dying of others. I have learned that death has no dominion over me when I keep watch with the dying. Another article I read was about Susan Sontag, the American intellectual who also died of cancer several years ago, and who fiercely resisted dying. What interested me most was a promise by one of her doctors: *We’re all going to die, but I’m going to spend just as much time paying attention to your last days as I do at the beginning.*

I found this very striking. I’m a new grandmother; I can spend countless hours just watching and holding my new granddaughter, who at this point has a repertory of eating, digesting, sleeping, crying, and sometimes, just calmly looking around at, probably, not much. How can someone who does so little take up so much attention on the part of anyone who comes into her ambit? But Amelia’s no exception – most babies have this effect on most people. What if we all accorded as much attention, devotion, caring, and love to the dying as we do to the newborn? Don’t they deserve it? Doesn’t the endstage of a life fully lived merit the same awe and commitment as a life that’s just beginning?

That caring takes a different kind of attention, and patience, and courage, and faithfulness. But all of us who have engaged in journeys with the dying can, I believe, commend that caring to you. It’s a caring that honors our baptismal covenant to *seek & serve Christ in all persons and to respect the dignity of every human being.*

That caring can teach us that, indeed, *death has no dominion.* Can teach us not to *fear that which kills the body but cannot kill the soul.*

Here’s a poem by the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore

### Last Poems 10

I'm lost in the middle of my birthday.  
I want my friends  
their couch,  
with the earth's last love,  
I will take life's final offering,  
I will take the last human blessing.  
Today my sack is empty.  
I have given completely  
whatever I had to give.  
In return if I receive anything—  
some love, some forgiveness—  
then I will take it with me  
when I step on the boat that crosses  
to the festival of the wordless end.

Alleluia! Amen