

Practicing Our Faith Sermon Series  
#6 – Dying Well  
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Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

I've preached a lot of funeral sermons in my career so far. Some of them have been incredibly difficult, like the funeral sermon for the little Emma, a two-year-old who died of a brain tumor. Others have been moments of celebration, like the funeral sermon for Jeanne, a pillar in a previous church I served. But the most challenging funeral sermon I ever preached was for a man named Stan.

Stan's funeral sermon was challenging for two reasons. First, Stan was an ornery son-of-a-gun, bless his little heart. It was hard to find a lot of people who had something nice to say about Stan, and I'd had my own run-ins with him. Many people who knew Stan echoed Mark Twain, who said, "I didn't attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it." As I started to write about Stan, I realized that I may just have to make stuff up. The second reason that Stan's funeral sermon was so tough was that Stan wasn't dead yet. This was an assignment in my seminary preaching class, to preach a funeral sermon on someone that we would have trouble eulogizing.

As I was working on this assignment, a thought struck me that still nags at me to this day. What if this assignment is given 50 years from now to a seminary student? The student is told to write a funeral sermon about a person for whom it would be difficult to come up with five minutes of positive material, and the person the student chooses to kill is...me? What if I'm Stan for someone else? Am I living my life and following my Savior in such a way that when I die, the preacher won't have to make stuff up?

Today we conclude our sermon series called "Practicing Our Faith." We embarked on this journey with the understanding that faith is not something we have, it's something we do, and in order for us to get better at it, we have to practice. We've looked at several different aspects of faith – like honoring our bodies and offering forgiveness and healing – to see how practicing these things will make us better followers of Christ. You can find those sermons on our website if you missed them.

Our last practice is dying well. I have to admit I'm a bit disappointed that the sanctuary isn't filled to overflowing with such a sexy sermon topic. I mean, really, who doesn't want to talk about dying? Well, if we're honest, none of us do. The topic of death is a real conversation-killer, so to speak. We don't like to hear about it, we don't like to talk about it, and we sure don't like to be reminded that it's going to happen, either to us or our loved ones. So, thanks for showing up today.

Of course, the irony about our reluctance to talk about death is it's the one thing we all have in common. Unless you were born in a manger and crucified on a cross, I'm pretty sure that you are doing to die. So am I. The last time I check the polls, the mortality rate of Americans still stood at 100%. Same for Iranians and Nepalese and everyone else on the planet. It happens every day. Since I've started preaching this sermon, dozens of people have died, hopefully not from listening to me preach this sermon.

It's almost comical what we'll do to avoid talking about death. I once called on a person who was very sick in the hospital to see how they were doing. When I got to their room, it was empty, so I asked a nurse where the patient was. She paused and looked down and said, "He's moved on." I said, "Oh, OK. What's his new room number?" She shuffled her feet and

said, “No, that’s not it. He’s transitioned.” I said, “You means he’s a woman?!?” No, she said, obviously not getting the joke, “He’s no longer with us.” I so wanted to say, “So, he’s in another hospital?” But I got what she said, so I simply said, “Oh, he died.” She nodded, her eyes on the floor, and quickly walked away.

I have a theory on why we don’t like to talk about death. It’s because we’ve made it so hard to accept that it’s going to happen. Back in Jesus’ day, when life expectancy was about half what it is now, death was more of a natural part of life because it happened sooner. Fewer babies survived infancy, fewer adults made it to old age, and so death was more accepted. But these days, we have all kinds of means at our disposal to prolong our life. When you can replace joints and take multi-vitamins and eat healthier, death seems like something to avoid, not something to accept. Like Woody Allen said, “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying.”

Another reason we’re not comfortable with death is that we’ve removed the role of the church from helping us process death. In biblical times, a person’s death was a sacred time, seen as a time to both mourn and celebrate, and Jews set aside a 30-day period for mourning the dead. In modern times, death has been relegated to two institutions: the hospital and the funeral home. One treats death scientifically, the other treats it as a business. And, the cultural expectation is that once the funeral is over, life should return to normal.

But it never returns to normal, does it? Life is never the same after a person dies. So, part of the practice of dying well is reclaiming the church’s role in helping people deal with death, either their own or that of a loved one. And that means helping them move through all the emotions that come with death, especially the move from lament to hope.

Lament is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow and it has deep roots in the Bible. Many of the psalms are psalms of lament, expressing despair or sadness and asking for God’s comfort and assurance. Lament is such a universal human condition that even Jesus experienced it. We all know the shortest verse in the Bible is, “Jesus wept,” but do you know why he did? While out of town, Jesus learns that his good friend Lazarus has died. Even though Jesus knew he was going to bring him back to life, when Jesus arrived on the scene and saw the intense sadness of Lazarus’s friends and family, the Bible tells us, “Jesus wept.” As Christians, we can only acknowledge the good news of Easter if we walk through the anguish of Good Friday.

But, as followers of Christ, we can’t stop at lament, because belief in Christ is our source of hope, even and especially in the face of death. Easter is coming, and it brings with it the promise that death is not a period for us, but a comma, as we move from the old way of living to the new one. When I do a funeral, I try to set the stage at the beginning by acknowledging that we gather to both mourn and celebrate, to look backward in remembrance and forward in hope. Funerals don’t erase the fact that the person has died, but they remind us that death isn’t all there is.

This is where we as a community of faith can practice and participate in the art of dying well, because dying well is less about the person dying than it is about the people who surround that person in those last sacred moments. Because we all know that not every death is a good death. Not everyone dies peacefully in their sleep at a ripe old age. Too many lives are ended too soon, too violently. This practice doesn’t hold a magic formula for transforming premature, tragic or unjust deaths into good deaths. I fully acknowledge the fact that not every death is a good death, but I believe God can work through every death to bring about good. If

the church has nothing to say to the grieving parent or family of the slain soldier, then it has nothing to say.

So for us, the practice of dying well speaks to the way we talk about death and caring for the person before and after their life ends. I was at Temple Adath Israel recently, one of our local Jewish synagogues. They have a huge wall that has on it a plaque for each person in their congregation who has died. Each plaque has a lightbulb attached that is lit during the month of the person's birth. It was powerful to stand in front of that wall and read the names of those whose lights were shining, as if to say, "Don't forget me. I'm still here."

That's really at the heart of the practice of dying well. When we do this as a faith community, we ensure that a person's spirit lives on within and around us, even though their body has given out. We promise to each other that, when we die, the church will gather to celebrate our life and mourn our death, and we are confident that the community will care for our family through prayers and visits and casseroles, that we will be remembered with white roses on the altar and having our names read on All Saints Day.

I mentioned Jeanne earlier in my sermon. During her last days, she laid unconscious in a hospital bed in her home, cared for by Hospice nurses and surrounded by her husband, Tom, and their two daughters. I was over at their house one afternoon, the four of us sitting around Jeanne's bed, each person holding her hand or stroking her hair. We sat around for a couple hours, telling stories, sharing memories, laughing about Jeanne's stubborn personality or crying over special memories. The Hospice nurse arrived, took Jeanne's pulse, and said quietly, "She's died." None of us knew. But I found comfort in the fact that the last thing Jeanne heard was the laughter and the tears and the stories told by her family, a beautiful and holy litany that helped carry Jean to her home with God. It made me think of the quote from writer Annie Dillard, who said, "I think the dying pray at the last not 'please' but 'thank you,' as a guest thanks his host at the door."

Not all deaths are as peaceful. In fact, most aren't. Dying for most of us will be a messy, painful business. We cannot expect to die well in the biological sense. I'm with Woody Allen, who said, "I'm not afraid of dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens." But through the love of our family, through the care of our church, through the promises of our savior, we can trust that what awaits us is nothing short of the resurrection shown to us through the empty tomb.

We can start practicing this today by how we choose to live, because dying well starts by choosing to live well, to live out all the practices we have talked about. You realize that we've already died, at least in a spiritual sense, right? When we were baptized, we were counted as dead to sin and alive to Christ. Each day, we are called to die to the things that separate us from God and to live into the promise of new life received at our baptism. Each day is a day to die well in order to live well, so that when we come to the end of our earthly life, our pastor doesn't have to make stuff up about us for the funeral.

In the story of Lazarus, Mary says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."