

From the Pastor's Desk

Contemplating Mortality

Both my mother and father died unexpectedly, with their boots on as they say. Unlike so many members in congregations where I have served, there was no time around a hospital bed or at home keeping vigil at their bedside with the assistance of hospice personnel. No, there was none of that, only a phone call that brought in the turbulent storm of tears and bereavement climaxing with the funerals, but the pain of loss continued for months and years.

As a pastor, I had presided over 75 or more funerals, but it wasn't until I buried my father that I realized what the bereavement process was really all about. It hurt like hell. When mom died a year and a half later, I will never forget the words a pastor friend said to me: "This is a mystical time for you and especially for your mother." It didn't feel very mystical at the time, but he was right. Who ever thought that having your face shoved into eternity would be so painful?

I have been listening to the PBS program "On Being" where Doctor Ira Byrock, director of palliative medicine and professor at Dartmouth Medical School was interviewed. His experience with hospice patients brought him "up close and personal" with people in the process of dying and his observations are profound.

In our culture, death is primarily viewed as a medical experience but it is more than that. While we benefit from the latest medical technology to prolonging human life, the side effect is that death has become rather clinical and perceived as a medical failure. But, *death is a stage of life* that can be deeply enriching to the one dying and his or her loved ones.

Often when a person is dying, the one dying and their family are reluctant to talk about it for fear that discussing it will hasten death and a sign that they have lost all hope for recovery. The tragedy is that the person may die with never taking the opportunity to discuss important feelings with loved ones.

During one of our text studies several years ago, I remember a pastor sharing a conversation he had with Roger, a pastor friend. As he visited Roger and brought him Holy Communion, he asked him, "How are you doing?" Roger said with his normal humor, "I'm dying but I've never done it before so I'm not sure how it's suppose to go!" His openness and honesty provided many opportunities for important conversations with his pastor friend and family about his approaching death.

Doctor Byrock pointed out that important transformative conversations for both the person dying and their loved ones involves discussion around these four statements: "Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you." Treating death as a stage of life provides opportunities for this transformative conversation. The person with the most power to initiate such open communication is the person dying, but family members must also have the ability to engage

in it. Our fear and denial of death can hinder this holy and transformative interaction with the people we love the most, which is unfortunate.

Doctor Byock indicated that the dying stage of life, unlike other stages of life, is unique in that it creates an opening for this important communication. All relationships, but particularly those that are stressed or broken can find this deeply enriching and healing. The dying process shakes us free from the veneer of who we think we are and the layers of defense mechanisms we have developed over the years. We are awakened from the illusion of immortality and suddenly the present moment takes on greater importance. We realize how important we are to one another and the connections between people is the thing that matters most.

What is filling our schedules no longer becomes important when someone we love is dying. In normal life we are held back by our fear, but dying opens us up to move beyond our fears. Dying is potentially a developmental stage of learning and repairing relationships. It can be a time of completing life for many people and their loved ones.

As I mentioned earlier, initiating conversation about death is primarily the decision of the person dying. He holds the key to the conversation by what he says or does not say. But it also demands the ability of loved ones to hear and respond. Instinctively we want to run from this conversation because of our own fear of the loss of our loved one. We must be careful not to allow our fear to shut down some very important conversation for ourselves and our loved one. I don't know if it is possible to make death our friend, but it's worth the effort to try. Death is as natural as birth. Perhaps the world from which babies come is full of people crying as she moves through the birth canal into our world. Life has no opposite. Death is birth.

"Mortality is a reminder about the inherent spirituality of life, whether you are religious or not. Death is like a hot wind that reveals our personal essence." Byrock states, "It draws us to something larger than ourselves that will endure."

Humanity longs for immortality and has placed this longing upon medical science. Statistically, most people will spend the majority of their health care dollars during the final weeks of their lives. Sometimes insisting on invasive procedures that have little chance of extending the quality or quantity of life.

~ PB

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet...The dead shall be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable put on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." | Corinthians 15:51-56