

A Matter of Life & Death

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I had to chuckle this past week when I read Pastor Janet Hunt's blog on today's text titled "When Dying Means Living."* With good humor, she describes what some – if not many of us - have experienced. The pain of trying to shed some weight and get back into shape. She tells us she knows that pain...the pain of joining a rigorous exercise class in order to take off those extra pounds and firm up that soft, saggy body. So she goes on to tell us that, "The pain is paying off. I don't hurt all the time anymore and my clothes are just a little bit looser. It's been worth the 'dying' of dragging myself out of bed at 4:45am a couple of days a week and putting myself through a kind of voluntary, organized torture...I have, indeed, had to die a little to get to this place where a richer life is mine, and now I don't regret the pain. Those first few weeks, though, when I was 'done in' after the opening stretches, I certainly could not have imagined this day would ever come."*

"And it's true in the rest of our lives as well. We see the proof of this where parents give up a whole lot of themselves so that their children might flourish...where the tables are turned later in life and adult children sacrifice to watch out for and help their parents as age catches up with them. Where spouses set aside their own wants and needs for a period of time to help their spouse become who they were meant to be. And yes, we see it in congregations where we give up our place in the pew for a newcomer, where we welcome children even when they fuss, when we reach beyond our fear and discomfort and speak to a stranger...In a thousand places and ways, we know this to be true. And it's not usually big deaths, of course, but small ones along the way which live out the truth of Jesus' words over and over again that our 'dying' somehow multiplies and results in life."*

Jesus's words, spoken there in the temple in Jerusalem during the feast of the Passover...words spoken to his Jewish disciples and several want-to-be Gentile disciples – words drawn from the mundane, everyday life of peasant farmers – words about seeds, or, more significantly "a single seed" that must die in the soil in order that a multitude of seeds...seeds of new life, might flourish and live. What did Jesus teach his followers? "I tell you. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Those who love their life 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 my servant will be also.” (John 12:24-26)

How amazing! How paradoxical! Can it be true that the key to living is dying? That, somehow, it's necessary to die in order to really live? That in dying we begin to live? Well...I guess if we act like good Methodists...do theology the Methodist way and look back to church history – to tradition – we remember that St. Francis of Assisi knew this maxim well as it shows up in his famous prayer for peace. Remember what he said? “It is in giving that we receive, It is in pardoning that we are pardoned... And it is *in dying* that we are born to eternal life.” And if we go back a bit further to the New Testament scriptures, we find the same message spoken by the Apostle Paul in Romans 6:5, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” And, I bet that if we reflect on our own experience in life we'll find it to be true as well. When we give sacrificially of ourselves, our finances, our talents and time...when we've given ourselves in these ways, we've discovered meaning and purpose and lasting satisfaction.

It seems to me that this is a basic law of life...as paradoxical as it appears - that dying is key to living. It's as true in the realm of psychology and sociology as it is in the realm of human relationships and spirituality.

In short, if you haven't been dying this past week, you haven't been living. The same is true for me. There's no real living without dying.

“What do you mean, Pastor Rich?” you might ask. And I say, “Ask Jesus!” What did Jesus mean by this teaching? In all four Gospels Jesus talks about...teaches about dying to self. And if it's in all four Gospels, I get the hint. I need to pay attention. I need to learn what Jesus means by this stuff about dying to self in order to live. Notice that it begins with me individually. And you individually. At a most fundamental level it means that I need to die to selfishness. I need to give up the notion and approach to life that “it's all about me!” Living for myself! Being preoccupied with my happiness, my success, my struggles and my failures. It means giving up the notion that life is all about me – that I'm the center of the universe. The sad fact is, according to Jesus, that when life revolves around me...when your life revolves around you, neither you nor I are really living.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain...a single, solitary, selfish, self-centered grain – all alone! But when it dies, it bears much fruit. What kind of fruit? Love! Love for God. Love for neighbor. As the Apostle Paul puts it in Galatians 5: “For the whole law is summed up in a single command. ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love!” And what are the manifestations of love? Paul goes on to tell us. Love manifests itself in “peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Rev. Janet Hunt, whom I referred to at the beginning of this sermon finishes her blog* on today’s Gospel reading pondering that maybe, just “maybe, in a way our whole walk of faith is a lot like my exercise class.

We all show up with creaking knees and our flabby abs and our too many years of not doing anything like this and we do this together (as a church) and little by little, we grow in faith and hope and promise. Only not for ourselves alone. That’s where the parallel ends, of course. This dying is not for our own journeys alone. But for the sake of the other. For the sake of the child, the parent, the grand-parent, the neighbor, the stranger – all those who make up the whole community of God’s people and the world, the creation, crafted and loved by God. That’s the dying and living that Jesus did. And that’s the dying and living that we are called to as well.” Amen.

Rev. Janet Hunt blog, “When Dying Means Living,” *Dancing with the Word*, 2012.