



Date: Oct 4, 2015

Title: "The Best Parts of You, #1: Your Loyalty and Love"

Scripture: Proverbs 3:2-11

"What makes for a good death?" asked the leader during the symposium about Ethics in Health Care last Sunday evening. What are the ingredients necessary in order to die well? After several insightful responses another hand went up: "What makes for a *bad* death?", someone countered. What a thought-provoking question...but we didn't have time to pursue it.

In the last segment of the seminar, I sat on a panel to respond to the following case study:

"Ms. Y. is an 86 year old church member. She was widowed in her mid-60's and her only child died ten years after husband. Her only relative in the area is a nephew, John, who visits her on a weekly basis. She and her husband were reasonably well off and she continues to live in the house she and her husband shared for most of their lives together. She now has in-home help come daily. Her own health has been failing, slowly, for over a decade and she is now permanently on oxygen. None of her various ailments are life-threatening or acute. She can move around the house, trailing her oxygen tube, but the oxygen tank and her frailty make leaving the house burdensome. Throughout her life, she has been known as having a sharp wit and a sharp tongue; both of those qualities are still fully present currently and the latter has had the effect of limiting the number of people willing to visit her.

On behalf of the church, you've gone to visit her. During that visit, she looks at you and says, "I don't understand why God won't let me die. I'm no use to anybody now and between my medical needs and trying to keep this old house together, I'm burning through the money we saved and that I'd just as soon pass on to John and to organizations I care about--like the church. I'd like for you all to start praying for God to take me."

How will you respond?"

I'll tell you how I responded! Little beads of sweat popped up on my forehead. Considering the size of my forehead, that's a lot of sweat! I glanced at the panel members beside me, hoping they had something to say.

"I'm good with Ms. Y's request," I blurted. "I'll ask God that her prayers will be answered. I'd want to ask her, 'Can we also pray about what life can be like before God takes you?'"

As we talked, we learned a little more about Ms. Y: the description doesn't mention any friends; her "sharp wit and sharp tongue" have brought about an acute isolation. Her nephew brings his son along, and while they visit, the son mows Ms. Y's lawn as a gift. She usually criticizes the quality of his work. She wants to give her money to Nephew John and the church when she dies, but she gives nothing to either now.

I raised my hand, "I have another response," I offered. And that's when I lost my nerve. Oh, me of little courage! I had something more I wanted to say: I thought it; I even thought of the words to use; but I wasn't brave enough to say it out loud. It might sound too harsh, I thought.

I'm going to say them now. (Debbie, pull the car up to the door and keep the motor running!) *People often die pretty much in accord with the way they lived.* I didn't make that up; hospice workers often voice that observation. People often die in sync with the way they lived. The first requirement for a good death at a good old age is a good life. God is great and merciful, and God may grant Ms. Y, at age 86, a complete turn-around and final days filled with rapturous joy, but I wouldn't count on it as a strategy for growing old happily. In a sequel to "A Christmas Carol," Ms. Y. and Ebenezer Scrooge are not likely going to meet and run off to Tahiti spreading cheer and good tidings to everyone they encounter.

Which makes this and the following sermons in October the most important sermons you'll hear me preach. We'll consider how to construct a good life now that will have you pleased with your life right now and up to the very end. This month I have my best chance to tell you about what will make the biggest difference in your life.

Jesus told Nicodemus that the road to living leads through rebirth. We've heard "born again" so often connected with getting saved from hell that it's hard to even hear the term without hitting the "delete" tab. But it's about renewal, restoration, about becoming fresh again. A life you want to live, one that doesn't leave you disappointed at the end, comes from frequent renewals, from regular re-births.

How can we become the kind of people who experience re-birth? Are there any of you who have grown weary? Everything has become stale? You feel like you're stuck in a rut, like it isn't working, it isn't exciting and meaningful like it used to be. How do you become the kind of person who has a re-birth so that life becomes new again? Instead of growing more bitter, more cynical, more skeptical, wouldn't you want to become more filled with awe, seeing more and more of the divine presence,

alive more than ever, finding joy and satisfaction and fulfillment in the small things you used to miss because you skipped right by them. How do you do that? That's the key question.

Two ways: by increments and explosions. There are small regular increments and there are nuclear explosions. Both can bring about renewal: increments and explosions. There are intentional habits, ways you can live, disciplines, mantras, practices that you follow so that you will have frequent mini-conversions so that you become new often. There are also explosions, when everything changes. There are steps you take and there are explosive moments. Explosions are dramatic and headline makers. In a horrible way, the attacks on 9-11 were page-turners in history. (Often those explosive moments are when life blows up, when everything falls apart.) At the same time, the Grand Canyon wasn't formed by an explosion. That daily flow of water has shaped the desert landscape into a wonder of the world.

Those increments you practice are the most powerful parts of you. And they have the power to be the best parts of you. Proverbs says it well: "Don't lose your grip on Love and Loyalty. Tie them around your neck; carve their initials on your heart. Earn a reputation for living well..." The pairing of love and loyalty are the very best parts of you. Don't overlook them; practice them; develop them, let them shape your life. You'll be happy with the result.

Ben Badinger didn't learn to play the piano in one single explosive music lesson. Years of working with Hyoun Joo and practicing regularly changed him from a kid who couldn't play a note to a musician capable of playing before an audience. In the same way, one furious session with your toothbrush at the bathroom sink won't produce the results you're hoping for at your next dental exam. Regular brushing and flossing are required.

What increments produce the life that works for you, one that leaves you fulfilled? "Say your prayers, read the Bible, honor your parents—you know the commandments," Jesus told the rich young ruler. "Been there, done that," the young man replied. "One thing," answered Jesus. "One thing. Generosity."

Being generous changes the way you see everything. It transforms the landscape from a shortage mentality—grab everything you can and hold on to it for all you're worth, because there isn't enough and it's going to run out—to an abundance mentality with the ability to see all that's there and enjoy it by holding it loosely. Your life may feel like an Arizona desert, but regular generosity to the river of God's grace that runs through your life, giving grains of sand here and some more grains tomorrow, and your life turns breathtaking. Behold—at the bottom of the canyon there remains plenty of

earth for today and all the tomorrows you can imagine! Being generous changes the way you see life.

Being generous also changes the way you affect life. Incremental generosity, giving regularly and faithfully transforms the landscape around you. I can't cure cancer. But I can walk a 5K and make a contribution to research; I can't build a sanctuary. But I can join my gifts to yours and this sanctuary stands as a beacon to the thousands of people who drive by our church every day.

This month I'm asking you to consider giving incrementally to this church. Making a pledge turns your giving from an act to an obligation. Woo-hoo, right? Some of you aren't saying, "Yes! give me a pledge card so I can have another obligation in my life!" I so want to say, "Never mind; just give whatever your heart feels like giving." But faith that connects with living always includes obligations; they're called "commandments." Don't think of them as rules, think of them as tools. You and God use a pledge to connect your love with your loyalty.

Guys, think of this as a walk through Home Depot. You eyeball all those tools that are on your wish list. "Man! What I could make with that!" Your pledge is a power tool increment that you and God can use to build a life.