

“Living and dying with purpose”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Hebrews 5:7-9 and John 12:23-33

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Who watched the Grammys last week? Yeah, me neither. But what did catch my attention was an NPR interview with one of the award recipients, Micheal League, the lead for the jazz-fusion group Snarky Puppy. (How’s that for a name?) The past year wasn’t kind to Michael. His grandmother died. His uncle died. His manager lost his mother. One member of his band had three people in his family die. All from COVID. He wanted to write a song about death. It could have been a song full of rage or sadness, but instead he composed this lovely, unhurried song, soft and warm, and he called it “The Last Friend.”

“Rather than thinking of death as this hooded being that suddenly appears in your final moments and cuts your cord with the living world,” Michael says that he wanted to think of death more “as a companion that knows you and that’s been with you your whole life.” In the song, death is with us, with all that we see and do, every dream we live and lose, waiting on the edges, not looming, just waiting, watching, and when we die, death is the last friend, gently taking us by the hand, and returning us home.

The friend isn’t COVID or cancer or a gunshot. Those are awful ways to die. Michael saw that. There’s nothing kind about them. But in his song, death itself becomes like an angel, who loves us and eventually guides us beyond suffering, to some place better.

This isn’t how we usually think of death. Death is a monster, the Grim Reaper, a thing to be battled. Indeed, even Scripture calls death “the last enemy” (1 Cor. 15:26). As a pastor, I have seen and held so many tears, because of death. It is an ugly, gruesome thing that takes from us the people we love, and threatens to undo everything we’ve built. It is Jesus on the cross. And yet, I have also seen the peace that can come with death, a release from suffering, a time of storytelling and love and forgiveness and life pared down to the essentials. I suppose that is Jesus on the cross, as well.

Perhaps the real problem is not how we think of death—whether enemy or friend—but rather that we don’t think of death at all, until it’s too late.

When Jesus tells his disciples that he will die, Peter tries to silence him. When he asks them to stay awake with him as he prepares to die, his disciples wander off and sleep instead.

Abstractly, we all know that we will, one day, die. But we’d rather not deal with it. In fact, we’ve built whole industries, including medicine itself, to avoid dealing with it. The problem is that this means, when we come to die, we often feel lost. We have no way of making sense of what is happening. Death becomes the end of meaning, the end of our ability to write our own story and make our own choices.

In his brilliant book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Happens in the End*, surgeon and Harvard Medical School professor Atul Gawande says that because we don't talk about death, don't prepare for death, we try to escape it at any cost. He tells the story of Joseph, a man in his 60s with incurable cancer. When Dr. Gawande met him, he'd lost 50 pounds; he was becoming paralyzed; radiation had failed. He had two options: comfort care, or a risky spinal surgery. The thing was, the surgery wasn't going to cure him; it wasn't going to give him his life back. But he was so afraid of dying that he chose surgery. He could have had several lucid, relatively pain-free months of meaningful time with his family. Instead, he suffered for 14 days and died.

"There is a modern tragedy, replayed millions of times over," Gawande writes. "When there is no way of knowing exactly how long our skeins will run... our every impulse is to fight, to die with chemo in our veins or a tube in our throats or fresh sutures in our flesh. The fact that we may be shortening or worsening the time we have left hardly seems to register."

Gawande isn't saying that we shouldn't seek out reasonable medical care; he is a doctor, after all. Rather, he's saying that we might be prioritizing the wrong things. From medicine to nursing homes, our greatest priority for the sick and the aging is to keep them safe. But people don't just want to be safe. They want freedom and privacy. They want purpose and the ability to craft a meaningful life full of what's important to them. What good is breathing if that's all we're doing?

But what if it were possible to experience both life and death as one continuum of purposeful existence? What if it were possible to live, and age, and yes, even die, differently?

Gawande describes places that provide all the medical care of nursing homes but also the freedom of home: private apartments, doors that lock, pets, and control. If a resident wants to eat chocolate all day, they can, because who in their right mind would choose a few extra years without chocolate? The operating philosophy changed—rather than the primary goal being to prolong life, at whatever the cost, the goal became to fill our days of aging and dying with as much meaning as possible. Put plants in their rooms; build a playground for children; give them animals to care for; give them a *reason* to live. Ironically, not only were the residents happier, they were also healthier and lived longer.

What's important to us may change over the course of our lives, but what doesn't change is the need to have purpose. Living is not the goal. Living—and yes, also dying—purposefully is the goal.

Gawande describes a daughter having a conversation with her dad, who was really sick. She told him, "I need to understand how much you're willing to go through to have a shot at being alive and what level of being alive is tolerable to you." The conversation was really hard. But then her father said, "Well, if I'm able to eat chocolate ice cream and watch football on TV, then I'm willing to stay alive. I'm willing to go through a lot of pain if I have a shot at that." She was completely taken aback. This was a retired professor. She couldn't remember having seen her dad watch a single football game on TV. But this was his criteria.

So, when her dad was in surgery, and dangerous problems emerged, she had a choice: she could either tell the doctors to continue with the surgery and risk him becoming quadriplegic, or she could stop the surgery and let him die. She had three minutes. She felt so scared. What if she chose wrong? And then she realized that he had already made the decision. She asked the doctors: Would he be able to eat ice cream and watch football? Yes, they said. So she sent them back in. He lived for another pretty good 10 years, even with his significant disabilities. And then, when his health deteriorated and he was facing life with a feeding tube, her father decided that was enough. He entered hospice. He died, at home, comfortable, with his family and a bowl of ice cream.

Gawande says these are the conversations we should all be having: What's important to you? If medical intervention has a reasonable prospect of achieving that, go for it. But if not, if it's more likely to diminish what's important to you, then think about making the most of the time that's left. For dying isn't the end of purpose. Living for the sake of living is the end of purpose.

I think this is what Jesus was trying to say to his disciples all those years ago, when he kept insisting on talking about his death. He didn't want to die. He was afraid to die. He says so to God. He weeps. But there was something more important to him than living: his purpose, his love for his people, his service to God. And when it came time to die, he didn't turn away; he faced it with that same purpose.

There was so much he couldn't control, from Herod to Pilate, from the crowds to even the manner of his own death. But he could control the purpose with which he met both life and death. He could hang from that cross, and in dying, still forgive as he had in life. And because he made that choice, death wasn't the end of his story; it was the continuation of his story. He lived all his life with God, and he died with God—all his life with love, and he died with love.

Surely, this is what Christ offers us: to make of death an expression of our life. "For I am convinced," writes Paul, "that neither death, nor life... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). And again he says: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8).

We all die. But what God offers us is the invitation, and the promise, to save us from the power of death to cut us off from our life's meaning, from the things that are most joyful and important to us. We can die, God says, with no less purpose than with which we live. We can die, belonging to God, belonging to a story that is our own, because we can say, as Christ said all those years ago, that we did not turn away. **Amen.**