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Questions Every Christian Asks

4. What About When I Die?

Psalm 139:7-12 NRSV Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, Even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Romans 8:35, 37-39 NRSV Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The late Dr. Joseph Sittler, a longtime pastor as well as theologian and ethicist at the University of Chicago Divinity School, once said that if he were doing his ministry over again, he would preach more often and more honestly about death and about the nature of both earthly life and the life everlasting. While he may have been convinced that he needed to preach more often about the Christian understanding of death and life, such a message has a very hard time being heard in our culture. In Monty Python's funny, irreverent, occasionally gruesome movie, "The Search for the Holy Grail," there is a depiction of medieval undertakers making their morning rounds through the village with their handcarts shouting "Bring out your dead!" One family brings out an old man who suddenly says "But I'm not dead yet!" That is, for the most part our culture's attitude toward death – we're not dead yet so let us not speak of it. Or if we must, let us turn it into something that will be in some way, for lack of a better word, entertaining and therefore non-threatening. (There are more and more stories of how Baby Boomers, in particular, are rejecting traditional funeral customs and instead offering friends and family some sort of "experience"). When a public tragedy occurs that involves death or killing,

you can be assured that within 24 hours someone will start talking about “closure” – even though those who have suffered such losses know that in some ways there is no such thing. But such talk is a way to try to evade talking about death.

As we continue our Lenten sermon series on the questions every Christian asks, let us try to discover – even in the face of our reticence to talk about it – what the Christian witness says about the subject of what happens at death. To do so, though, we need to make an important distinction between “how” and “what.” You see, even though our sermon’s title question may be “what about when I die,” we tend to look for a “how” answer. We want to know not just the **what** but the **how**, the **mechanics**, the **details**, **the machinery of it all**. Human beings, in fact, since that moment when we became conscious, have speculated and wondered about the details, the mechanics, of what lies on the other side of earthly life. Those of the Hindu faith talk about a person’s being absorbed into the Great All, the Great One. Buddhists talk about reincarnation, that death is an exit that brings you round again to another entrance where you are given the chance to live a better life than you were able to before. Christians, too, have speculated about those details, those mechanics. And there is, in fact, more than one understanding in the New Testament of what happens at death. There are, in fact, two main ideas, both of which have carried on down to this day, both of which you can find the hymns we sing and the prayers we pray.

The first of these ideas is that one has a “soul” and that it is that soul that is immortal, so that at death your soul, the very essence of who you are, leaves the body and journeys to be with God. In one passage in the New Testament, for example, it says that the “ body [is to be] destroyed” and that what goes to God is the soul. But the second idea is that of the resurrection of the body. Paul talks about that idea this way in another letter to the Corinthians: *“The body... is meant... for the Lord”* and *“God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power”* (1 Corinthians 6:13b-14). Let’s talk about this one

first. This language about the resurrection of the body reminds us of something very true: our bodies are important; they are not something accidental to who we somehow “really” are. Yet, sometimes Christians have acted as if having a physical body was some sort of unfortunate and embarrassing accident. You can find too much theology down through the ages that dismisses, denigrates, even denies the importance of human life being really and truly embodied. But that is wrong. For think about it: it is indeed our bodily relationships that make us who we are. To be touched, to be seen, to be heard, to hold and to love and to embrace – none of this is possible without a body. Moreover, our experience of a sunset, our ability to put something into beautiful words, our ability to grasp what is wrong with the car and visualize how to fix it, our ability to see wrong and want to right it – and a thousand other examples – are possible because we have brains, an incredible part of our bodies. This notion of the “resurrection of the body” is an attempt to say that for both this life and the next all of these things – the relationships, love, beauty that are made possible by our being embodied beings -- will continue to matter and will be somehow preserved.

But our ***anxiety*** comes at exactly the point where we begin to **literalize** this language, as it were, when we began to ask about the exact mechanics. And when this notion of the “resurrection of the body” is read too literally it actually does indeed make for anxiety. For you and I know what happens, physiologically and biologically at death, and we wonder how in the world any body that has been dead any amount of time can possibly be restored. And there are some who – in their anxiety about the mechanics – have said that no one should be an organ donor at death because their bodies will not be able to be resurrected, restored, in a complete state. But, again, that is to take far too literally this notion – and it denies the wonderful gift of new or restored life that a person can make possible for another person through the donation of organs. Now, that’s a deeply personal decision, of course, but please hear this: the notion of the resurrection of

the body does not mean that you cannot use your earthly body when it is finished to help others whose bodies are failing them. In fact, God takes joy, I believe, when we are able to do that, when good can come out of bodies that are no longer needed by their “owner.” For the God Who was able to give us this amazing body in this life will not be held back in offering us eternal life because we have donated a heart or corneas or kidneys to someone in need.

But there is also that other notion in the New Testament of what it means to have eternal life in God – that one’s immortal soul goes to be with God. Now, just as there is truth in the notion of the resurrection of the body if we don’t read it too literally, so too is there truth about this notion of the immortal soul; it also is an image that seeks to remind us of some important things. For, after all, what is **most** important about you or me is finally not the accidents of our bodies – as wonderful as they can be – but the fact that we are unique, individual, particular creations of God. Human beings want to affirm that in some way each of us is indeed unique and that that uniqueness will be carried on and preserved at death. And so the notion of the immortality of the soul is an attempt to say that you and I in all our uniqueness will live on somehow. But with this notion, too, we can sometimes get too literal about it – and then it also can make not for assurance but for anxiety. For example, there have been some in Christian history who take this notion in the wrong direction and have said that because it is our soul that is finally what is important and imperishable we should neglect or even hurt the body. There are those who have been ashamed of their bodies and seen them simply and only as temptations to sully their souls. But surely that is not right either. Surely the God who gave us bodies with taste buds and the ears to hear gorgeous music and the capacity to smile and hug and laugh and cry and feel does not want us abusing those bodies under the impression that we are somehow thereby honoring and uplifting the soul instead.

But here is what I want to say this morning: both of these images – and **any other**

concrete image that you might want to offer for what eternal life means – are finally **metaphors**; they are not cookbook descriptions, they are not meant to be read woodenly. If you or I want to know the exact mechanics, the details, the “how,” of eternal life and safety with God, then I am afraid we shall be disappointed. And yet that does not dispirit me and I hope it does not dispirit you. Because even though we can’t know the details, the mechanics, the “how,” what we can know is what is at the very center of the gospel. It is found in that simple and eloquent affirmation from Paul: that there is nothing, nothing in all creation – neither life nor death, nor bodies that fail, not minds that get cloudy, nor hearts that are harder than they should be, nor hurts nor disappointments, nor sin – nothing, nothing that will separate you or me from the love of God through Jesus Christ. Nothing shall separate us from God. If you want six words that sum up the Gospel there they are: ***Nothing shall separate us from God.*** By what mechanics, I don’t know. Through what details, I can’t say. But what I believe we *can* say is enough, it is enough.

Before we close, though, I want to return to Dr. Sittler’s remark; notice that he said he would preach more about death and eternal life AND **earthly** life. You see, as important as it is to know what the Bible and the gospel affirm about death and eternal life, it is just as important to live our earthly lives well and in accordance with what we know about eternal life. What do I mean? Just this: As we have seen, the metaphors of an eternal soul and a resurrected body both convey something incredibly important for how we live here on this earth too. The fact, first, that human beings are embodied creatures means that we cannot “spiritualize” problems like homelessness and hunger. The Gospel is not just for one’s soul, it is not just some sort of insurance policy to be collected on at death while the embodied conditions of life are ignored, it is not simply enough to pray for people whose bodily situations are awful without doing something more. As Pope Francis puts it, “You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That’s how

prayer works.”¹ For after all, in the words of Mother Teresa, "Each one of them is Jesus in disguise."² When Jesus said that he came that all – note that qualifier, **all** – might have life abundantly, we make a profound mistake when we think that he meant only people’s spiritual lives. To be sure, it is a good and needful thing to feed people’s spirits, to help wean them from views of reality and views of God that are hurting them. But it’s not enough: the Jesus who came to this earth didn’t come simply and only as a “spiritual” being – whatever that might be – but as one who was born into a poor family, a family who knew the terror of being refugees and the grace of being welcomed into a safe land, a Jesus who didn’t simply pray for the 5000 on that hillside but fed their bodies, a Jesus who said when we failed to feed the hungry and house the homeless we fail Him.

The fact that, as the notion of the immortal soul teaches, that each and every human being is a unique creation of God also means that we dare not hide behind reducing people to “issues” or problems or policies. Yes, we need policies and practices that welcome the stranger, that insure that no one is sick or dies simply because they are poor, that continually work for a day when no one who wants a home will lack one and no woman is forced to sleep on the streets where, according to Ann Lantz, Director of ESM, she stands a 95% chance of being sexually assaulted within two weeks. But something of our souls die if we only see such people as abstractions to be “worked” on, and we run the risk of becoming what poet Edna St. Vincent Millay ruefully said about herself: “I love humanity but I hate people.” The opportunities here at First Christian to know some of these hurting folks not just as abstractions but as unique God-created individuals are ones that I hope more will avail themselves of: when you eat dinner or help serve breakfast to a homeless family living here for a week as part of our IHN/Family Promise work, you discover that these are not simply a label called “the homeless” but unique,

¹<http://www.azquotes.com/quote/811303>

²<http://www.catholic.org/clife/teresa/quotes.php>

complex, creations of God. When you work with some of the clients at ESM you discover that these are not just “those people,” but are individuals beloved of Jesus. When you volunteer to work at a hospital, you are reminded that the patients are not just a segment of the “health care issue,” but men, and women, and children uniquely created and loved by God.

Dr. Sittler said that he would preach more often and more honestly about death and about the nature of both earthly life and the life everlasting. He was wise, for the way we live and the way we die and yet live everlastingly are inextricably interconnected. In this life, and the life to come, God cares and love each and every one. That’s the good news for you and me, that, as the Psalmist said, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?... If I ... settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” I don’t know who first said “God loves you and there is nothing you can do about it,” but it is true, in life or death it’s true – which means, as is always the case, that such good news is also a challenge to you and me: to help to care for those whom God also loves, to not treat them as abstractions, to feed them spirit and body. Once again, Mother Teresa says it powerfully: “There is always the danger that we may just do the work for the sake of the work” – that is, treating folks as abstractions. But, she continues, “This is where the respect and the love and the devotion come in - that we do it to God, to Christ, and that’s why we try to do it as beautifully as possible.”³

Wise words indeed. And so my prayer this morning is this: that we shall ever more fully know that the God who has promised us life abundant and eternal is the God who calls us share that news, that hope, in the most tangible of ways. “For I was hungry and you fed me, I was in prison and you visited me, I was naked and you clothed me....”

³<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mothertere158114.html>