

Sanctity of Life (St. Michael's – Jan. 12, 2020)

Jack and Sally were both in their 80's. A widow and a widower, they'd both lost spouses some years before. But they reconnect at their 70th high school reunion. And at the dinner they have a marvelous time together. Spirits are high, the connection is strong, and finally Jack gets up the courage to ask Sally, 'Will you marry me?' Sally thinks about it for five seconds and replies, 'Yes, I will.' And the evening ended on a joyful note.

However, the next morning as Jack replays the conversation, he can't remember Sally's response. Did she say 'yes' or 'no?' With fear and trepidation, he picks up the phone and calls her. When Sally hears the question she responds, 'Why you silly man, I said yes. And I meant it with all my heart.' And Jack breaths a sigh of relief. Sally then continues, 'And I'm so glad you called, because I couldn't remember who had asked me.'

As we look at aging, it's important to keep a sense of humor. Because otherwise it can be overwhelming. We can be buried by it.

Some of the greatest anguish I've ever seen was in my grandparents as they battled dementia. And in my mom as she cared for them. I still remember holding my grandfather's hand as he wept, feeling so lost and alone.

Aging can be terrifying. And as Christians we're called to embrace people who are suffering—with the love of Christ and the hope of the gospel.

Today is Sanctity of life Sunday. Next week 100,000 people will march on Washington DC, including many of our Anglican bishops. And they're essentially marching to say, 'Human life is *very* good.' No matter how old or young you are.

Normally on this Sunday we focus on the unborn. And how God calls us to be a voice for the voiceless.

This morning however, I'm going to do something I've never done before. I'm going to preach on the end of life. What does it look like to honor the elderly, the infirm, and the disabled?

Why this change of focus? Lots of reasons, but one is - a dark movement has arisen around the world, that aggressively takes the lives of the old and the sick...through euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. In the last 20 years nine states in the U.S. have legalized this evil.

And we can see where this is leading. Simply look to the Netherlands, the pioneer of this movement. In 2017 Britain's Guardian newspaper (not a Christian publication) had an article entitled, 'Has Euthanasia Gone Too Far?' The author notes that well over 25% of all deaths in the Netherlands are induced. That's 40,000 people a year. The article cites examples of young people with mental illness being euthanized, as well as dementia patients euthanized against their will, being held down by family members as they receive the lethal injection. However, by far the most common form of induced death is palliative sedation where people are sedated and then allowed to die of dehydration.

Tragically, I've seen this right here in Charleston. Right down the street at our friendly neighborhood hospital. The darkness is at our doorstep.

And none of this is surprising, given the rise of secular materialism. Materialism says that life is a random biological accident...and there's no afterlife. In the words of Richard Dawkins, 'The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.'

My friends, if you believe your origin is meaningless, and your end is meaningless, this will affect how you treat people. And there will be an increasing measure of pitiless indifference.

And so this morning I'd like to look at what God says about our origin, what God says about our end, and what God says about our present, especially when it involves suffering.

First, our beginning. Genesis 1. Human beings are made in the image of God. We're absolutely unique in creation. In Genesis 2 God breaths His Ruah, his breath into Adam, and Adam becomes a living being. Later King David cries out, *'What is man that you're mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor...I praise you for I'm fearfully and wonderfully made.'*

No matter how old, sick, or disabled we are, we're still fearfully and wonderfully made—possessing dignity and value. As CS Lewis notes, there are no ordinary people. *'You've never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals we work with, marry, snub, and exploit.'*

Yes, we are immortal, and we're meant to live with Jesus forever. Not only that, we're meant to reign with him over the new heavens and the new earth for eternity. To put this in perspective, our earthly life compared to our eternal life is like one grain of sand compared to all the beaches of the world. Our origin is glorious and meaningful and our end is glorious and meaningful.

But note one thing here: Our lives do not belong to us. God created us. Jesus died for us. Our lives belong to Him. We are just the stewards of the gift. As Paul says, *'You are not your own, you were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body.'*

And this is why for 2,000 years Christians have fiercely resisted abortion and suicide. Common practices in the Roman empire. We will not kill our babies, our elderly, or ourselves. This not a modern political issue. This is a theological issue defined by God thousands of years ago.

And so how do we apply these truths? As Christians we should never ask the question, ‘Is this life worth living?’ Of course it is! The real question is, ‘How can we benefit this precious, irreplaceable life?’

Frank had dementia. And every month he attended the men’s breakfast at his church. One week, as the men were sharing, Frank stood up and started talking. It was just meaningless chatter. Unrelated words. Nothing made sense. He probably only spoke for a minute, but it seemed like an eternity.

And yet as he spoke, the men around the table leaned in. They looked Frank in the eye. It was hard to listen, but they listened well. No one tried to stop him. When he finished, the men spoke of how thankful they were for him. They told him he was a good man. They talked about how the church wouldn’t be the church it was, if it weren’t for him. They told him they loved him.

No, the elderly, infirm, and demented do not need our pity, they need our love.

Now this does not mean that life must be sustained at all costs, that every possible treatment must be used. The Bible says, ‘*For everything there is a season. A time to be born and a time to die.*’ There comes a moment when the Lord is calling us home. At that moment it’s OK to decline *some* treatment and move toward heaven. As the Bible says, ‘*Blessed are those who die in the Lord.*’

But it’s important to know the criteria for declining or withdrawing treatment. Christian ethicists usually offer two.

ONE - If the treatment is useless.

TWO - If the treatment is *excessively* burdensome.

And so we're not obligated to continue chemo if it's not working. We don't need to try the surgery that won't help. We don't need to be on a ventilator forever. And when someone is actively dying, and their organs are shutting down, *then* we can in good conscious withdraw feeding tubes.

And yet, be vigilant my friends. We live in a culture of death that is no longer Christian. Studies have shown that 50% of doctors in America support physician-assisted suicide. And that worldview inevitably influences care. And so do not be surprised if one day, you are pressured to hasten the death of a loved one. I've seen this many times. This is the world we live in. And we have to be ready, to stand with the helpless.

So we've looked at the origin of human life...created in the image of God. We've looked at the end of human life...called to reign with God forever. What do we do with the in-between, especially when suffering is immense?

We begin with Jesus and we begin at the cross. Jesus' death not only saves us, it also provides a lens to interpret our suffering. And the cross tells us that things are not what they seem and that suffering is not meaningless.

Because in that darkest moment of all on the cross—hidden in the suffering—God was working the most miraculous kind of good. Salvation. And Christ calls us to share in His miraculous work. 'Pick up your cross and follow me,' Jesus says. 'If we share in his suffering, we shall share in his glory' Paul says. 'Our slight and momentary afflictions are preparing for us a weight of glory beyond comparison.'

This is not to say that suffering is pleasant or desirable, but that's it's *meaningful*. Of course we don't want to suffer. Even Jesus said in Gethsemane, 'Father take this cup of

suffering from me.’ Many of the greatest heroes of the faith wanted to die. Wished for an end to their suffering. From Job to Elijah from Jonah to Moses. And yet they endured in faith.

Dostoyevsky, who suffered incredible things including prison, bankruptcy, and the death of two young children, once wrote this: *I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for... That in the world’s finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they’ve shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.*

Somehow, in light of the cross we can believe that suffering is meaningful.

But say we have severe dementia or are in a vegetative state. How could *that* suffering be meaningful?

First, we’re still made in the image of God and worthy of love and honor. Dignity is inalienable.

Second, we’re still a temple of the Holy Spirit. We’re not reducible to our cortex. So that even if we’re completely out of our rational minds, the Holy Spirit can still pray with our spirit, in groans too deep for words. For all we know, the greatest prayer warrior on this planet is someone in a vegetative state, through whom the Spirit is interceding for the kingdom of God.

Third, we’re still members of Christ’s body. We may be the weakest member of Christ’s body, but we’re members nonetheless. And this is what Paul says about the weakest members: *‘The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body we think less honorable, we bestow the greater honor.’*

If I have dementia my purpose may simply be to help others grow in compassion. In their ability to love the ‘least of these.’ As Bonhoeffer wrote, *‘We must bear the burden of a brother.*

We must suffer and endure the brother. It's only when he's a burden that another person is really a brother and not merely an object to be manipulated.'

Dementia and disability may not be the cross *I* would choose, but still my suffering has meaning. St. Augustine once said, '*God has many martyrs in secret....some times you shiver with fever: you are fighting. You are in bed: it is you who are the athlete [running the race].*

My friends, I hope you can feel how radically countercultural this is. There's a massive divide between Christianity and the secular culture of death. And in the coming days many of us will be faced with decisions around the sanctity of life. And how we respond will determine the fate of our nation. You think I'm exaggerating? Let me close with a story.

Did you know that in the early days of Christianity, two massive epidemics ravaged the Roman Empire? In the years 165 and 251 AD. Experts suggest that a third of the population was wiped out by the plague. In Rome they were burying 5,000 people a day. It was so horrifying that almost everyone fled the cities. Including Galen, the famous doctor. One eyewitness of an ancient plague in Athens wrote this:

The doctors were quite incapable of treating the disease...Equally useless were prayers made in the temples...[thousands] died with no one to look after them; indeed there were many houses in which all the inhabitants perished through lack of attention...The bodies of the dying were heaped one on top of the other, and half-dead creatures could be seen staggering around the streets...the catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion or law.

We're talking extreme biological terror. So great that people abandoned their friends, their faith, and their morality.

But note that I said *almost* everyone fled the cities. The Christians stayed put. And they not only cared for their own, but their pagan neighbors as well.

An eyewitness named Dionysus wrote this:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need...and with them departed this life... for they were infected by others, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead. The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner.'

My friends, what in the world could have driven people to do this? To care for unknown and inconvenient strangers, knowing they would likely die?

...Simply and only because they knew that another had died in *their* stead. That when they were lost in sin, Jesus Christ bore their brokenness, and laid down His life for them.

Dr. Rodney Stark a prominent sociologist—and not a Christian—notes that that the rise of Christianity in these early centuries was largely because of their response to abortion, infanticide, and these horrifying epidemics. It was a countercultural *respect* for human life and a countercultural *response* to human suffering. And this is what led to the spread of the gospel.

And so today may we celebrate the gift of life—our breathtaking origin, our glorious future. May we stand for the helpless and be a voice for the voiceless. And with great care and compassion may we love the least of these, for Jesus' sake. Amen.