

Honoring My Wishes - All Saints Sunday

This weekend is a special festival in the Church Year. We call it All Saints Sunday. All Saints is a day set aside to give thanks for those who have gone before us in the faith, to give thanks for the dearly departed. Later in the service this morning, we will say a prayer of thanks for those who have gone on to be with the Lord.

Since All Saints is already a day when the church talks about death and dying – we have decided to engage in a conversation today about preparing for death. My guess is that some of you are thinking to yourselves right now, “I was almost going to sleep in this morning!” Instead you get up and come to worship - and now we’re going to talk about death. The truth be told – as a preacher, it is my experience that people don’t seem to want to talk about death at all - and they are not real excited about a sermon that discusses preparing for death. Frankly, it is not just death itself that we want to avoid - we want to avoid **thinking** about it - and we certainly want to avoid **talking** about it.

Christians avoiding talk of death seems rather curious to me. I’m guessing that almost all of us **hope** we get to heaven someday. In fact, I’m guessing that some of us – maybe many of us – are **confident that we are going to heaven**. There is nothing wrong with that. As Christians, we can be confident that we are saved by grace through faith - and someday we will receive the promise of eternal life. We’re going to heaven. But in order to get to heaven, **we all must die**. Given the rich biblical promises about heaven; no more tears, no more sadness, no more pain, a banquet table with rich foods, being reunited with those who have gone before us – I would think we would not just **be open** to talk of death, but we might even **like talking** about it. As Christians, we have this beautiful promise of a place prepared for us in heaven – but to receive the promise – we must die.

Our society values youthfulness. From the first time someone sees a grey hair on their head or a tiny wrinkle in the skin – we find ourselves taking almost heroic steps to stay young. Some of those steps (like using a skin moisturizer) may make some sense – but it is becoming more and more common for people to spend thousands of dollars for plastic surgery to look younger. Our society seems to be urging us to **avoid aging at all costs**. The natural extension of that thinking is that we don’t want to talk of dying or death. It seems we think if we talk about death, somehow death will occur. If we don’t talk about death – then we can live forever – right? We all know in our heads that it doesn’t work that way, but we all seem pretty uncomfortable talking about it. Today is All Saints Day – and today we’re going to talk about death.

The Bible teaches us that **THERE IS A TIME TO LIVE AND THERE IS A TIME TO DIE**. In Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 King Solomon reminds us of the rhythms and seasons of life. He reminds us that *There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die*. Dying is a part of the rhythm of life. Death is not something to be avoided at all costs. Death is the gate through which we walk – to step from this life to eternal life.

King Solomon knew that death was a part of life. He had been taught about death and life by his father, King David. When King David was near death himself, he called for his son Solomon. In First Kings 2:1 we read that *When the time drew near for David to die, he gave a charge to Solomon his son*. It said “When the time grew near” – did you notice that? That means he knew that his time of death was getting closer. David knew that since his own death was getting closer, there were some things that he needed to talk about with his son Solomon before he died.

Death is **not supposed to be avoided** at all costs. Even Jesus knew when his death was near and

in Mark 10:33-34 he tells his closest followers what to expect. He tells them, *We are going up to Jerusalem, Jesus said, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him.* By talking to his disciples about his death – he was working to help prepare them for what was coming. They were not comfortable with the talk. Peter jumped in and said he would be sure none of this talk of death would ever materialize – but, you may remember – that is when Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me Satan.”

It is **important that we think about death**. We also **need to talk** about it. Loved ones need to know your preferences when your death comes. Who do you trust to make health care decisions if you are unable to do so? Have you communicated your wishes to them? Do you want extraordinary measures taken to resuscitate you if you are near death and your heart stops? Do you want to be buried or cremated? Do you want to donate your organs to save another life? Do you want simple arrangements for your funeral – or something more extravagant? Where do you want to be buried? What songs should be sung at your funeral? Who gets your wedding ring? There are lots of important issues that need your attention.

If you have ever had to make decisions at difficult times – especially if you were in the position where you had to make the decisions for someone else – you know the extraordinary burden that this can present. When loved ones are nearing the end of their life – health care providers will ask family members, “What do you want.” I am concerned about that question. I don’t think it is up to you and what you want – if your mom or dad are laying in a hospital bed – I think the right question is, “Under these circumstances, what sort of health care measures did your mom (or dad) want?” When the time comes that you are facing your final hours, you ought to be able to determine what sort of care you receive. If you are competent and conscious – you can make the decisions. But if you are not able to do so – your loved should be honoring your wishes. But in order to do that, you must take the time now – to think about the health care you want, the extraordinary measures you desire, and even the funeral arrangements you want made. I believe you owe it to your loved ones to think this stuff through – make the hard decisions - and communicate those decisions to your loved ones. In that way – you give them the gift of knowing that they are doing exactly what you want done.

But in order to have all that happen, you need to **TAKE STEPS TO GET READY; MAKING YOUR FUNERAL PLANS**. There are two steps to this process. One has to do with making funeral arrangements – and the other one has to do with deciding the kind of medical care you will receive in your final days, when you are near death.

Since we know all of us will die - **all of us need to make preparations**. In the book of Genesis, we have the story of Isaac making his preparations for his death. He wanted to have a special meal that only his son could make. In Genesis 27, we read, *“When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called for Esau his older son and said to him, My son. Here I am, he answered. Isaac said, I am now an old man and don't know the day of my death. Now then, get your weapons—your quiver and bow—and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like.* Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson recently starred in a movie called The Bucket List. In the movie, both are patients facing terminal illness and both have unfinished business – things they want to tend to before they die. Have you taken time to think about those things? Later in the book Genesis, we hear that Jacob – who has assumed the name Israel - finding himself ready to die. He had 12 sons and was long ago separated from his son Joseph. When he was finally reunited with Joseph, we read. “Israel said to Joseph, Now **I am ready to die**, since I have seen for myself that you are still alive.”

There may be things that you need to do before you die; unfinished business – a bucket list of sorts. I urge you to **tend to these important matters**. Reconciling broken relationships, visiting special places, saying heartfelt words – these may all be a part of your preparing to die. And since we never know when death may come – we ought to take the steps now – today.

Since many of us will get sick before we die – we also need to take the important step of making an Advance Directive. That is where you think through a variety of possibilities – and let your loved ones know what you want in terms of health care – in case you can't make those decisions. Now some of this sounds complicated – but it's really not that bad.

One form of an Advance Directive is to **complete a document** - usually called a **Living Will**. That is where you put your wishes in writing, telling your doctor and your loved ones what you want done. The other avenue to complete an Advance Directive is where you **appoint a person** – usually called a **Proxy** – and they make the health care decisions when you can't. You appoint this Proxy person – and they make decisions on your behalf. This is really important stuff.

Some of us avoid dealing with this because it all starts to sound so complicated. We have a wonderful **opportunity for you to work through this process**. We're asking you to come with your family. Couples should attend together. Parents should attend with their grown children. Come with people who are likely to be there when a health crisis might occur. We also have trained people called Encouragers – there are fellow members who are going to help you navigate the process and complete the needed paperwork.

Preparing for the end of your life is mighty important work. We have developed a variety of resources to help you make your funeral plans, identify where you file important documents, and what you want done in terms of health care. Come to the *Honoring My Wishes* Workshop and take the time to give this gift to your loved ones. Stop avoiding it and pretending you will live forever. The reason *Honoring My Wishes* materials were prepared is that people usually fail to express their wishes about the end of life, the medical community feels obligated to do everything possible to revive and extend someone's life. Grief stricken family members want to keep loved ones here, no matter what. While life can sometimes be extended after these catastrophic illnesses, the **quality** of life can be quite poor. We're not thinking real clear at those times. Many times, people who have their lives extended later say that they were ready to go.

Individuals in their last year of life consume a disproportionate share of medical resources. One percent of the population accounts for 30 percent of the nation's health care expenditures. Nearly half of those people are elderly. Medicare, the health insurance program for the elderly, spends nearly 30 percent of its budget on beneficiaries in their final year of life. Slightly more than half of Medicare dollars are spent on patients who die within two months. I have to ask the very hard question – is that what we want to have happen? It is not uncommon to spend a hundred thousand dollars for a multi-week stay in the hospital - where they take every conceivable step to keep someone here – when they are often ready to go and meet their maker. I sometimes wonder if all the medical advances we have been blessed with help us avoid death – and keep our loved ones here with us to meet our needs – instead of letting them go to be with their Lord.

It is critical that you think these things through very carefully. Then you need to take the next important step and **DISCUSS YOUR PLANS WITH FAMILY**. Families can be blessed by these conversations – as our loved ones assure us that they are ready to go home and be with the Lord and they are at peace. When they communicate **their peace with us** – it can bring **peace to us**.

Turning again to the book of Genesis, the father of these 12 sons knows he is near death and he

has some pretty specific instructions about his death and burial and he brings his son Joseph in and has him follow an ancient practice to bind him to the promise he is about to make. In Genesis 47, we read, “*When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, If I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.*” They are a long way from home, in Egypt – and Israel wants to be buried back home. “Promise me that you will bring me back home to bury my bones.” In a very reverent and holy manner, I expect that Joseph carries out this promise - knowing that he was doing exactly what his dad wanted. Kids – especially grown kids - don’t you want to know and do exactly what your mom and dad want done - when it comes to the end of their life? *Honoring My Wishes* is a program designed to help you quit denying death and help you have the difficult conversations you need to have. ***Honoring My Wishes will help you think about these incredibly important issues and talk about them with your loved ones.***

In the long run, you will find it to be a blessing for you and for those you love. I fully realize that some of you have heard the reminder to tend to these important matters – and done nothing. That is why over half of us have not completed a will - and the vast majority of us have not put our advance directives in writing. We’re launching this initiative on All Saints Sunday and we hope that you will take time to 1) attend the *Honoring My Wishes* workshop and 2) work with your Encourager to complete the needed paperwork and 3) talk with your families so they know what to do. The holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas are coming. We hope that you take an hour between now and the end of the year to sit down with your loved ones and tell them what you want, so they can honor your wishes. They may not want to talk about it. Tell them **you need to talk about it.** Medical Studies have shown that talking about death will not make it happen. ☺

Tell them that you are saved by grace and when you die - you will meet your maker - and you will go to a place prepared for you – to live forever. Tell them that you **TRUST THE PROMISE TO LIVE WITH HIM FOREVER.** You may want to begin by reading a well know passage from the Gospel of John the 14th chapter. “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.*” As Christians we can face life with great joy - and **we can face death with even greater confidence.** Jesus promised his disciples in John 5:24, “*I tell you the truth - whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*” Did you notice that it doesn’t say “might have” eternal life? It doesn’t say “maybe” or “hopefully”. The verb “has” is in the **present tense** – it is yours **now**. You have already started living your eternal life. One of the steps on the journey will be to say goodbye to this body as you age. But you can trust that God holds you securely in His arms. Talk with your family and work with them to get ready – so when the day comes – you can walk easily through the gate of death and enter into life eternal. You and your family will be blessed if you do.

-Pastor Lou Forney
St. Paul's Lutheran
(402) 895-3366

Copyright © 2008

CHAMPS Center for Healthy Aging, Ministries, Programs & Services
13271 Millard Avenue Omaha, Nebraska 68137 Tel: (402) 895-2224
Website: www.champsonline.info Email: champs@crossandheart.org