

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dying to Live

Sunday, September 1

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They say you can't talk about three things: Religion, sex, and politics. Well, I think "they" are wrong, whoever "they" are. We do talk about those things. We're just terrible at it.

However, there is one subject most of us avoid like the plague: death. Yes, we are sad when a loved one dies and we will attend the funeral and acknowledge death. But we don't really talk about death and the deeper meaning of it. Truthfully, we either deny it or avoid it. No one wants to think about death.

Of course, the kicker is that dying is exactly what Jesus Christ calls his followers to do. If you really want to experience what it means to be a Christian, if you really want to experience the joy of following Christ, if you really want to find life, hope, and resurrection in your life, Jesus says, you must first die. You have to die in order to live.

Now if that seems counterintuitive, you're right. It is. In fact, much of what Jesus had to say was counterintuitive and filled with paradox. Jesus said, "It is only in giving that you receive." He also said, "If you want to be first, you must become last" and "If you're going to be master, you must first become a servant." Jesus also said, "If you want to find your life, you're going to have to lose it." And all of these ironic statements can be summed up in one sentence: We must die if we want to live.

Jesus says more about this in John:

Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. John 12:24–25

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was constantly teaching us that death must precede birth. There is no resurrection without a crucifixion. A seed must be buried before it can grow.

I am not just talking about physical death. I am talking about dying on an emotional level, spiritual level, even a material level. I am talking about dying to self and being prepared to surrender to God those things we think we can't live without. We think we can't live without certain things. Christ tells us we can't truly live if we hold on to those things.

Now, that's not what you, me or anyone wants to hear. I realize that. We don't want to have to give up anything in order to gain something. We resist death and loss with great stubbornness.

Barbara Brown Taylor remembers the time she witnessed a protest to death. She was attending an Easter Vigil at Christ Church in New Haven, Connecticut, and the time came for a three-year-old named Ellen to be baptized. Nothing unusual about it, except that the three-year-old's parents wanted her to be baptized by immersion. This is a problem with a church which only has a bird-bath baptismal font.

Still, the priest agreed and came up with a 36-gallon garbage can decorated with ivy. It was not pretty, but it suited the purpose. When the priest bent down to pick Ellen up, she screamed, "Don't do it!" She planted her feet against the garbage can, causing the water to spill on the floor. Again, she screamed, "Don't do it!" Taylor does not remember whether or not Ellen did it, but she can still hear that child's protest ringing through the rafters of the church. Though only three years old, Ellen believed she would die and wanted no part of it.

Like Ellen, we really don't any part of it, either! When we feel God leading us to leave sin behind, we shout, "Don't do it!" When we hear God calling us out of our comfort zones, we scream, "Don't do it!" When we feel God pulling us away from our past, we hang on tooth and nail and scream, "Don't do it!" Most of us go kicking and screaming into death. We don't want to lose those things we hold dear.

I wish I could tell you that there is an easier way to grow and find life, but there isn't one. All of us must die in order to give birth to something new. A bad habit must die to provide room for a good one. Certain ways of thinking must change in order to get the desired action. A place of comfort must be left in order to move to a healthier one. All such radical changes must occur in order for something new to be born.

Just listen to newborns scream as they make their miraculous move from the familiar womb into a foreign world. It must be awful for them, but there is no other way for birth to happen.

Ask a recent graduate how difficult it is to leave college and enter a new world of responsibility. Such change is tough, but without making that leap, there is no opportunity, growth, or accomplishment.

Ask a couple how challenging it is to let go of their own pursuits in order to raise a child. A big sacrifice, but there is no greater joy than raising a child.

We must die in order to live. We must be broken in order to be made whole. We must give in order to receive.

J. Wallace Hamilton once called on a home and found the mother of the house in her garden. She was down on her knees in an onion patch plucking out the weeds. She kept working as he talked to her. As they spoke, he noticed she was not only picking out the weeds, she was plucking out good onions, young ones, throwing them away with the weeds. He said, "Why are you throwing away those perfectly good onions?"

She replied, "You've never gardened, have you? There are too many onions in this bed. I have to pick out some of them to give the rest a chance to grow. To leave them all here would mean they would all grow up to be little spindly things and none of them would be robust and healthy."

Commenting on that conversation, Hamilton said, "There are times when the Divine Gardener must do that. Growing in our hearts are too many desires, conflicting, competing desires. We want too many things ... so the Divine Gardener thins them out, cuts them off to give the best a change to grow."

The gifted writer Urban T. Holmes III makes this clear for us: "Any good gardener knows that beautiful roses require careful pruning. Pieces of living plant have to die. It cannot just grow wild."

The same is true of us. Parts of us need to die if we are to become the person that is in God's vision.

I think of what needed to die in my life in order to give room for the joy of Paul. Before Paul, I used to think about all of the things I was able to do because I did not have kids: traveling, reading, setting more ambitious career goals. All great things, but many of those aspirations had to die to make room for the joy of Paul. And now I wouldn't trade being a father for any of those things!

I have also learned over the years that certain ways of thinking and attitudes had to die in order for me to be the person and minister God has called me to be. For example, I used to be in the comparison trap. I used to compare myself to other preachers and think that if I did not attain their success or do what they did, I was not worthy or successful. As I have matured, I have learned that God calls each of us to our own unique journeys and success is being faithful to that particular journey. God calls me to be me, not someone else. I have had to let comparisons die to be at peace with who God has destined me to be and find true joy in my journey.

What do you need to make room for in order for God's will and joy to enter your life? What needs to die in your life so you can truly live?

Do you remember what Paul said?

“How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Romans 6:2–5

These powerful verses teach us that each death hides a resurrection. There is no need to be afraid of letting certain things die in your life because the promise is that there is a resurrection hidden within each death.

I am reminded of someone I know who battled alcoholism for years. A couple of years ago, she was arrested for driving drunk and hit rock bottom. It was a death. She felt the tremendous toll it had on her, her family, and on her finances. But a resurrection occurred as she allowed certain unhealthy things to die in her life. Here is a text she sent me about a month ago:

“It's weird ... I feel like things are just falling into place since I ‘broke’ and started putting my life in GODS hands. It's like the beautiful puzzle is just snapping together. Random pieces are just falling into place. Cheesy, but that's how it feels.”

Jesus said it: “Those who lose their life will find it.”

Jesus' very life and death gave us the greatest example of today's message. Can you imagine all that Christ had to give up? Remember, he was also human. His ambitions had to die. His desire for a long and prosperous life with a family had to die. His own will had to die. His true moment of death was not his last breath on the cross. His true moment of death came when he said, “Not my will but yours be done.” But because he was willing to die, he lived! He was resurrected! And his promise

to us is that we will live, too. Therefore, we don't have to be afraid of death—any death. This leads me to tell you what it means to be a Christian. If you are confused about all this death business and what it has to do with being a Christian, then listen up. The key to understanding this mystery of dying to live and following Christ is seen one verse tucked in the book of Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. Galatians 2:20

Now take a look at the last four words in this verse: Christ lives in me. Now think about the word Christian. It is a combination of two words: **Christ + In. Or Christian.**

What does this mean? You cannot live the Christian life on your own. The only way you can live it is by “Christ living in you.” So, as James Merritt says, “You can boil Christianity down to one single simple sentence—Jesus gave His life for me so he could live His life in me. Another way to put it is ‘the Christian life is not you living for Jesus; it is Jesus living in you!’”

Merritt remembers getting a letter years ago from a man in his church concerning his four-year-old granddaughter. His son-in-law is a surgeon, and both his grandson and granddaughter were involved in this precious story.

His son-in-law got a call one morning for an emergency surgery. When he got home after the surgery, his son asked his dad about the surgery. He said, “Dad, did you have to cut the man open to see what was inside of him?” The dad said, “Yes, son, I did.” He said, “Dad, did you see his lungs and his stomach, and could you see his heart?” His dad said, “Yes, son, I could.” Well, at that moment his little four-year-old granddaughter who had been intently listening to the conversation, immediately looked up at her dad with big, wide eyes of amazement, and said, “Dad, you did see his heart?” The dad said, “Yes, I did.” She said, “Dad, did you see Jesus in his heart?”

That's what it truly means to follow Jesus. He comes to live in your heart and the world can see him living in you.

So, what do you need to give up in order to live? What needs to die so you can find life? A sin, habit, attitude, desire, ego, or pride? King Duncan writes,

“For many of us life is one long battle for control. First with our parents, then with our teachers, then with our employers, and finally with ourselves. That is the humbling effect of a bad habit. We discover we can't even control ourselves. We have only one hope—to yield to God's control. When we are able to do that, we can rest assured that God will take care of us”

“William Hinson recalls the time when his children were younger and one child's pet died. Dr. Hinson says that he practiced ‘replacement therapy.’ When one pet died it was replaced by another pet. One time his youngest daughter Cathy's cat died. Together they went to find another pet. Cathy selected a tiny peekapoo puppy. When they got home, Dr. Hinson agreed to build a dog house for the new pet to live in. ‘The only kind of dog I knew very much about was a really big bird dog,’ he recalls, ‘so when I built the dog house, I built a very large house.’ In fact, the house was too large for the small dog.

“The size of the dog house scared the little peekapoo puppy. No matter what they did the little dog would not go near the dog house. They would put his food in there, and the dog would go hungry; they would put

water in there, and the dog would not drink. ‘In exasperation,’ Dr. Hinson admits, ‘I would shove him in and hold my hands over the door; but the minute I would move, he would run out, unbelievably frightened.’ Nothing worked. The little dog would not go into his dog house no matter what they did to entice him.

“In disgust, Dr. Hinson went inside, and sat down in the den while his daughter, Cathy, stood outside crying over her dad's impatience and the refusal of her puppy to cooperate. After a while, Cathy got down on her hands and knees and crawled into the dog house herself. When she crawled into it, something wonderful happened. That little puppy trotted right in beside her and stretched out on the dog house floor. Before too long, the dog was taking a nap. All the shadows now stood still for him, and all the fear was taken out of the darkness, because the one whom he loved and trusted had preceded him into that dark and frightening place. It no longer caused him fear” (“Roll Call” by Duncan).

If you are afraid to let go of what is holding you back, remember that wherever God leads, he will be with us. We don't have to be afraid. There is no place we can go where God is not already present to comfort and guide us. Someone once said, “Your greatest joy is on the other side of fear.” You must die in order to live. So, come and die. Your life is waiting.

