

**8:32**

**John 14:25-31**

‘I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you.” If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

**Psalm 62:5-12**

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.  
He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.  
On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.  
Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him;  
God is a refuge for us. Selah  
Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.  
Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.  
Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

**Deal With It: Death**  
**Rev. Charles Schuster**  
**January 25, 2009**

I’m just thinking back to one of the first classes we had here at the church in my time, was that class which was called “Theology is Biography” and Martha Conant talked about being in the airplane that crashed in Iowa, and Richard Senn talked about beginning a seminary and schools in Brazil, Win Schendel talked about growing up in Nazi Germany. It was powerful, just powerful, and I think that maybe the reason this particular sermon has been so hard, because I think it’s important, it’s so important. I’ve written this sermon three times. If you gave me a little more time, it would take off on a different path, I think. But the subject is death, and the sermon is designed to help us deal with it. I think it’s the most important problem we face, and it permeates everything we do. Maybe we’re not aware of it, but it does. We even have a class now that meets on Thursdays, talking about developing a theology of death, dying and life. It calls from us everything we have, to find the wherewithal to face it.

So important is the subject that when you look at the Gospels which give us their varied interpretations, their understanding of the life and teaching of Jesus, it is so oriented and

bent toward the importance of his death. When you think of the thirty-plus years that he lived, and those last three years, the Gospel spends so much time on the last year, on the last week, on the last day, and beyond. It's almost as if, as some scholars have suggested, that the Gospels wrote their story from his death to his birth, or to his baptism. Why is that? I think it's because of the importance of the subject. We're all going to die. Some day we will not be. There was a time when we were not. Some day we will not be. And this morning I want to have us deal with it. If we're going to deal with death, we must begin to look at life. The subject is not morbid. If we're going to deal with death we must begin to look at life and know what we are blessed, be put in touch with the meaning we get in the life we live. We are blessed, and we know it. We are lucky, and we say it. We are graced, and we share it. And death reminds us of this. And Jesus would speak of his mission in life. "I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly." And Paul in those moments of imprisonment, trouble and death, would say, "O Death, where is your sting? O Death, where is your victory?" We're blessed.

Many of you know Gene Amole, knew him as one of the columnists for the Rocky Mountain News. He learned that his death was near, and he wrote a book about his last days. The title of the book is *One More Time*. He writes, "A sunrise is something to carry through the day, regardless of what goes wrong, or what challenges lie ahead. The meaning of the first precious minutes of daylight, those can sustain us. Of course, the sunrise, you know, doesn't care if we watch it or not. It will keep on being beautiful even if no one bothers to look. The sunrise makes no demands on us. It illuminates, it blesses our lives, expecting nothing in return." And then he says, "Now is the time to take pleasure in small things. A single blade of grass trying to poke its way up a crack through the sidewalk. A kitten scratching at the door. The fragrance of coffee brewing in the morning. The soft leaves on a twig branch. The symmetry of a snowflake. None of us knows whether this will be our last day. Should it be, we make the most of it. We're blessed to be alive."

A week from this past Friday I went to a funeral of a friend. Charlie and Mary Lou had both lost their spouses, and they met in a grief support group that I had put together at the church ten years ago. On Christmas day, Mary Lou invited Charlie to Christmas dinner with her family, and at the end of the day he turned to her and said, "Will you marry me," and she said, "What?" and I had the privilege of performing their wedding at the church in Arvada, and it was packed. And on Friday a week ago, the church was packed again for Charlie's funeral. They had had ten wonderful years together. Something happened the very moment that Charlie died, and it made his passing meaningful beyond words. He died at Lutheran Hospital in Wheatridge, and there's this thing they do there. When a baby is born, they play music. A lullaby is put over the PA system, and the music goes into all the rooms, and can be heard outside the hospital as well. On the very moment when Charlie died, a baby was born, and the music played. Mary Lou and Charlie's family will forever remember that moment. It was a time that was, in many ways, so, so sad, and yet in another perspective, another emotion reminded them of the blessing of life itself. And to think about it, "Lullaby and good night," lullaby, a child is born, good night.... a good man left us. Talking with Mary Lou, she said through her tears, "You

know, that's the cycle of life. It tells me that I'm blessed, and that has incredible meaning for me now."

Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, reflects on the blessings of life. "From the beginning," he said, "I had a sense of destiny as though my life was assigned to me by fate, and had to be fulfilled." His life had meaning. He was blessed. William Faulkner, the novelist, received a prestigious award. In his acceptance speech, he said, "I believe we will not merely endure, we will prevail. We are immortal," he said, "not because we have an inexhaustible voice, but because we have a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance." We're blessed. We will prevail. We can deal with death, because we know we have been blessed to be alive, and we count our blessings, and we have meaning. But that isn't all. It isn't just blessing and grace. It's also legacy. We have been a blessing. We will be remembered. We can deal with death if we know we will be remembered.

William Inge once said, "I have no fear that the candle lighted in Palestine years ago will ever be put out." And we heard our children sing, "This little light of mine." If we light our candle bright, it seems to me, our candle will burn forever. A legacy, that we leave a blessing. It need not be so large that many can see it, it need not be reported far and wide. In little things that are bigger than we know. A kind word spoken, a quiet deed done, a moment of brilliance. Harold Kushner once spoke to the clergy and social workers and families and survivors in Oklahoma City, ten years after the bombing. He had been there right after the bombing, and worked with the same people, but he went back ten years later, and he said to them, "Would we be better off if we could forget that terrible day? If the media didn't remind us of it? If we hadn't turned the site of that destroyed building into a museum, or a memorial park? Or would America be better off if no television station ever again showed the scene of the airplanes flying into the World Trade Center? Would we be better off? I think no. People we have loved and lost, dreams we have dreamed and lost, are woven into the very fabric of our identity, never to be extracted."

There are ghosts walking the streets of Oklahoma City this week. Listen to their voices. Hear what they are saying. They are saying, "Remember us, because the only place we still live is in your memories. Remember us because our lives, whether they were lived long or were cut short, were filled with love, with plans made and hopes shared, and those moments of love and yearning deserve to be remembered. They will remember us. We were a blessing. We can deal with death if we know that. We have a legacy."

One of the people I most admire lives right here in Fort Collins. I have heard him speak on two occasions, and I have the book that he and Jean wrote: Thomas Sutherland. Thomas Sutherland, taken hostage in Beirut, six years a prisoner. He would ask us, "Do you know what it's like to be put in prison, to be held hostage, to be captive? It's very lonely, and you worry that people will forget you. I felt abandoned. I didn't think anybody even knew that I was in prison. The guards had a radio. They turned it on, I'd listen to it. It was the British Broadcasting System, and they would talk about the hostages, and I kept listening for my name, hoping that someone would say that I was in

prison and that I was innocent. But my name was never mentioned, and I assumed that no one knew.”

Of course we knew. Annual Conference, the United Methodist Church, the Rocky Mountain Conference, every year when he was in captivity, every year we would pray for his release and we would invite Jean and Kit to join us. Of course we knew. Finally he was released. They flew Jean to him, and the two of them were then flown home, and as they were getting off the plane he was amazed to see the lights and the television crews and the reporters and the people holding up signs, a huge crowd at the airport, and he turned to Jean and said, “Look at all those people. There’s got to be a celebrity on board this plane. Look around and see if you can spot who it is.” She looked at him and said, “Honey, it’s you. It’s all for you.” And when she told him that, he started to weep. He couldn’t stop. He said, “I thought everybody had forgotten about me. I didn’t think anybody cared.” He still is a blessing. We have been a blessing. They will remember us.

It doesn’t need to be a big thing. Reinhold Niebuhr was right when he said, “Nothing worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime, and so we live by hope, hope that we got something started. Hope that we did some good. Hope that it mattered that we lived, that something would outlive us.” Legacy. Memory. To be a blessing in the way we live. To have a legacy in life allows us to deal with death.

Yesterday a basketball coach died, Kay Yow was her name. She coached women’s basketball at North Carolina State University. She was a blessing. One of her best friends said, “Kay has instilled within me everything that I have that enables me to know what it is to be a winner.” “She had such a profound effect on all of us,” someone said. Someone said, “There is not a woman in the world battling breast cancer who does not know the influence that she had. The courageous battle on her own, and the money she raised for research.” They named the floor at NC State after her. Her oncologist observed that whenever Kay came in for her treatments, instead of coming in anonymously, just slipping in, she would visit with the other patients, and cared about what was going on in their lives. Kay will be remembered. She dealt with death. Once she said, “I think life primarily is about investing in people, and if you can just help one person in a small way, if they have a better life because of something you have done, you’ve done something good.”

It doesn’t have to be a big deal, to be a blessing. But when something needed to be done, we did it. They will remember us. When someone needed a kind word or a shoulder to cry on, we were there, and they will not forget. We have done our best. We have given our all, and the good we have done stays with us and is our act of praise. We have been blessed, we have been a blessing. No need to apologize, no need to be ashamed. We are a blessing. Death is not to be feared.

There’s one more thing that helps us deal with death. It’s our hope of life after. The psalmist said it – “For God alone my soul waits in silence. For my hope is from God. God is my rock and my salvation.” At death, we believe we are present to the one who blesses. At death we believe there’s a soul, there’s a spirit, and there’s more. It is said in different

ways, but it all goes back to the same thing: a trust in God. A trust in God, the one who blesses, at the time of death and beyond. Jesus told his disciples, "In my father's house are many rooms. I go and prepare a place for you, and I will take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also." His image is, it's a mansion. It's got lots of rooms. Some describe heaven as golden streets where there's no death and no tears. Some have described it as a long tunnel with a golden thread, and our loved ones waiting on the other side.

Many of you know that my grandfather was an important factor in my life, a role model, really, a mentor, a friend, the best man at our wedding, a lawyer, a judge, a writer. When my father died, my mother and sister and I moved from Ohio to West Virginia and into our grandparents' home. He would take me fishing, and imparted some of the most important lessons I ever had in my life. He taught me the importance of working hard. He taught me to tell the truth and to be honest. He taught me to do the best I can do, and that I would be the monitor of how effective or good it was, not other people. It had to satisfy my criteria. We didn't talk about God much on our fishing trips, but he claimed to be closest to God in the mountains and the streams of West Virginia. On his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday he wrote something. He calls it a poem, that's a stretch. The title is "A Fisherman's Prayer." It says,

"When I go home, dear Lord, may I be met by some tanned cory from my fishing days, his stringer full, his line still wet, with that secret fishing hold in his gaze. There must be quiet woods for folks like us. What would we ever do with golden streets, who hear the sound of the song and the wind in the willows instead? Give us a fishing rod apiece, a quiet sweep of water over deep rocks, and once in a while, a strike, and we'll continue to argue with each other through the ages."

You would go fishing with him, he and his fishing partners would spend the whole time in those little boats, arguing with each other over the darnedest things. And then he wrote,

"Look, and you will see beauty. It's there. Search and you will find faith. It is there."

We can deal with death because we know it will not frighten us. The blesser is present, the Lord, in life and death and life beyond death. Ralph Waldo Emerson said it: "To a soul alive to God, every moment is a new world, a wakened soul." Toyohiko Kagawa, the Japanese Christian theologian wrote it: "In darkness, I meet God face to face, I'm constantly praising God for the joy of darkness. I am constantly praising God for the joy of moments lived with God." A Dutch patriot was permitted to write a letter to his parents, just before his execution by the Nazis in a firing squad. In the letter he writes, "In a while, I will be executed. That is not so terrible. On the contrary, it is beautiful to be in God's strength. God has told me I will not be forsaken. I feel so strongly the nearness to God. I am fully prepared to die. They can take only my body. My soul is in God's hands. May God bless you all." Thomas Merton said a similar thing. "Why should I worry about losing my bodily life that I must inevitably lose anyway, as long as I possess a spiritual life and identity that cannot be lost against my desire?" The blesser of all, the Lord, the

God we worship, present to us in life, never absent, with us in death and beyond, and we can deal with death.

Yes, you and I can deal with it, because we know we have been blessed, and every day we count our blessings. Because we work hard to be a blessing. And they will remember us. And at the end of the day, at the end of our days, the blesser, the Lord, God is with us, and there is nothing to fear. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?