

“To Be or Not to Be: That is the Question”

Philippians 1:21-26

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***“To live is Christ; to die is gain.
If I am to go on living in the body,
this will mean fruitful labor for me.
Yet what shall I choose?
I do not know!
I am torn between the two.”***

In Paul’s words written to the church at Philippi we are privileged to overhear his soliloquy---Paul is thinking out loud. It’s not every day we get to listen to a great spiritual mind struggle with issues of life and death.

Paul is alone; Paul is in prison (again). He contemplates the life and the death God has called him to. The circumstances of his life are beyond his control. Eugene Peterson says,

“. . .circumstances are incidental compared to the life of Jesus that Paul experiences. It is a life that not only happened once in history, but it continues to happen. It spills out into the lives of those who receive him, and then continues to spill out all over the place.”

Despite difficult circumstances, Paul is joyful. Paul is completely assured, because he belongs to Christ.

Still, that being said, we may be surprised to overhear Paul’s indecisiveness. If someone as committed as Paul struggled, someone who’d actually encountered the Risen Christ, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Paul doesn’t really know what to do. He is torn. He is hard pressed to decide.

Paul considers the possibilities of life and the certainty of death, even though Paul probably believes it is not up to him to decide. Some scholars wonder if Paul may have contemplated suicide. We will never know.

It is the same possibility depicted by Shakespeare in what many consider to be the greatest of all his tragedies, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Hamlet asks nearly the same questions as did Paul sixteen centuries

earlier, though in an entirely different context. Some scholars think Hamlet was considering suicide, and certainly the way this part is acted often suggests this possibility:

“To be or not to be, that is the question.”

“Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them.”

“To die, to sleep, no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. . . ’tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. . .”

What we overhear in Hamlet’s struggle is the struggle between the choice to continue life in silence, or to fight it and risk death. Hamlet recognizes that death may be preferable to life. The sufferings of life will be over. Death may be like sleep. Hamlet also wonders about what lies beyond the grave. He fears it might be worse than the terrors he is up against in life.

In contrast, what we overhear in Paul’s struggle is the struggle between the responsibilities of the Christian life and Christ’s glorious promise in death. Paul’s struggle goes well beyond his own personal gain or loss, and that is where he and Hamlet REALLY diverge. Paul KNOWS that death will be preferable to life, because in death Paul will be with Christ. Knowing this, Paul struggles with his desire to be with Christ against his belief that God has more work for him to do here.

There are at least two messages in Paul’s soliloquy: Living is not just about me, and dying is not the final word. These are two messages we desperately need to hear, not just with our ears, but with our hearts, with our whole being.

About fifteen years ago, a prominent Catholic priest had what he called a “near-life experience”. Richard Neuhaus recounted that experience in an essay. I share it with you today.

“We are born to die. Not that death is the purpose of our being born but we are born toward death, and in each of our lives the work of dying is already under way. The work of dying well is, in largest part, the work of living well. Most of us are at ease in discussing what makes for a good

life, but we typically become tongue-tied and nervous when the discussion turns to a good death.”¹

Neuhaus makes the point that we are rather blasé about large scale death and destruction; we can distance ourselves from such things. It is the single death which affects us. It is the death of our parent, the death of a friend, the death of a spouse or child, which completely unnerves us and breaks through our reserve. Neuhaus says, “It is death in the singular that shatters all we thought we knew about death.”

Even though Neuhaus had gone to physicians periodically throughout the year for his severe stomach cramps, even though he had more than one colonoscopy, the doctors had found nothing wrong. He ends up in the emergency room with a ruptured tumor and he nearly dies hemorrhaging after emergency surgery.

At one point in intensive care after the worst of the danger had passed, Neuhaus said he encountered a presence and a voice telling him, “Everything is ready now.” He was completely lucid at the time. He was convinced the image and the voice was a message from God.

In his two-year period of recovery, Neuhaus (who had been so productive) was surprised by the absence of fear. He describes it this way, *“It had less to do with courage than with indifference. Maybe this is ‘holy indifference,’ what the spiritual [greats] describe as “a quality in a person’s love for God above all that excludes preferences for any person, object of condition of life.”*

When we are convinced that God has made everything ready, we too can be indifferent. We can freely offer up our lives to serve God here and now. When we are convinced beyond a doubt of God’s baptismal promise: that we die in Christ, that we have been buried in Christ, and that we are born again in Christ, we can bear all kinds of suffering and inconvenience. When we know we belong to Christ, we can expect the “holy indifference” that comes from the certainty that all we are and all we will be, rests in Christ.

There is something wonderful about such holy indifference. Something good about not having to be in control all the time. There is freedom in letting go of the usual “must haves” and “have to’s” and “obligations” that most of us get drawn into these days. If we take Saint Benedict’s advice and “Live every day with our death before our eyes,” a

¹ P. 222, Richard John Neuhaus, “Born Toward Dying”, reprinted in The Best Christian Writing of 2001, Edited by John Wilson and Larry Woiwode.

lot of unnecessary things fall away. A lot of worries drop off the radar screen. When we know death is not the final word, we cannot be undone by anything that happens: any disaster, any hurricane, any crash of the market, any loss of health, anything. Anything. When we know death is not the final word, we can give more freely here and now. Because everything has been made ready.

This knowledge profoundly affects the way we embrace life. It may even affect how we embrace life in the midst of death.

June Bingham Birge was a writer and author. In October 2007 thoughts of her impending death appeared in an essay she called “The Exit Visa”. She was eighty-eight years old and her cancer had metastasized².

Her first thought was “Hey, this isn’t as bad as I thought it would be.” “Why not?, you may ask. She writes, “Well, one reason is being really old. Recently we’ve been forced to take note of the fact that we absolutely have to die of something pretty soon.” She went on to describe her gratefulness that it would be quick, that she still had her mind, that she had time to say goodbye to her loved ones. She considered her ending a blessing. What she didn’t say in the essay (and I wish she would have) was that she could approach death with such holy indifference because she, too, knew death was not the final word. She, too, knew, everything was ready.

On the other end of the age spectrum, when our youngest son was seven years old, he shared with me his idea about death. I remember it because it was so thoughtful; because it was so thoughtful, I wrote it down (or else I probably wouldn’t remember it today!). Here’s what he said:

“I kind of think of it this way. It’s like when you die, there’s a special key to get into--- to open the door--- of heaven. And you can’t get in there without that special key. And to get the key, you have to die.”

Friends, we have been given the key. And the key is Christ. The key unlocks not only our dying, but also our living.

² P. 31, June Bingham Birge, “The Exit Visa”, in The Living Pulpit, Oct-Dec 2007.