

## From the Pastor's Desk

### He Smiled At Death

Mom knew something serious was happening to Dad. They were visiting my brother in Montana when he had a heart attack. He was about to start the car when it happened. The strange thing was that when the ambulance arrived, Dad was standing outside the car waiting for it. The pain he was having in his chest had subsided. As they rolled him into the ambulance, he had a smile on his face. That was the last time Dad was seen alive. A couple of months later, I was in Billings and went into the emergency room where he was taken. There were three rooms and my brother said they had taken Dad into the center one. I walked in to look at the last sight he would have seen. The machines and the white walls all seemed so stark. I walked outside and wept.

My Dad smiled at death, but did he know he was going to die? I think so and he welcomed it. Life was getting difficult, his mind was beginning to fail and he knew it was going to get nothing but worse. He died with his boots on and in sight of one of his favorite places, the Beartooth Mountain Range where our family spent so many vacations. For Dad, life was good and so was death.

Unlike so many others, our family was spared having to make decisions about whether or not to use artificial means to extend Dad's life. I don't know if he even had a Living Will or other advance directive indicating his wishes if such a situation were to occur.

Recently, I read an article about end of life issues that I had difficulty believing. Of terminally ill patients, who do you think is more likely to choose to extend their lives by invasive artificial means? Religious or non-religious patients? Surprisingly, according to an American Medical Association (AMA) study, religious patients by three to one. The article states:

*Researchers "found that terminally ill cancer patients were nearly three times more likely to go on breathing machines or receive other invasive treatments if religion was an important part of their decision-making process." (AMA) Statistically, these treatments did not improve the quantity and certainly not the quality of a person's life. One would think that religious folk whose faith has allegedly guided them through their lives would be less inclined to panic at the end. Nevertheless, the study indicates just the opposite. I suppose we could draw two quite different opinions. In the first, we might assume that this vigorous attempt to prolong one's days represents a deep reverence for life and, therefore, an equally deep resistance to giving it up. The other, more cynical, opinion might be centered on the proposition that the religionist's faith isn't as strong as publicly proclaimed and when push comes to shove, one's true beliefs come forth with the subsequent reluctance to meet one's maker.*

*In my own experience, I found that, generally, one died the way one lived. If someone spent their life nurturing relationships and welcoming new experiences, death was met with little fear and often a profound sense of satisfaction. Coming up to the threshold of death with many issues unresolved, on the other hand, was often a difficult and frightening encounter. This profound fear may account for the fact that 1/3 of the Medicare budget goes to the last year of life and 80% of that is for the last month. Judging from this new AMA study, religionists do not go gently into the night.* (Rich Mayfield, retired ELCA Pastor)

I am curious what kind of religions were represented in the AMA study. My suspicion is that religions that use fear of damnation to motivate behavior are more likely to produce people less able to enter death peacefully. Once God is perceived as damning it's difficult walk into his eternal embrace even if you consider yourself saved. "What about that sin I've confessed but still sometimes bothers me? Will it ignite God's wrath?" Such can be the fears of someone on their deathbed. I remember speaking with a person in a previous congregation I served who was nearing death. He came from a Christian denomination that taught hell, fire and damnation and then, during his final days, his religion was not serving him well. He feared he hadn't been good enough to merit heaven and the many sermons he heard about damnation were haunting him. At the end of his life, it appeared that for him no religion would have been better than graceless religion.

We need to honestly ask ourselves what kind of God we believe in. Most of us would probably say, "A God of love". But, deep, deep down in the depths of our beings, do we really? Our understanding of God in the depths of our souls is the one we will face on our deathbeds. Do you have any remnants of a God of hell, fire and damnation? If so, I encourage you to exorcise yourself of this demon and in the name of Jesus and our compassionate God, cast it into the depths of the nether world, never to return. We are daughters and sons of a loving God who has grasped us and will never let go. His grip is far stronger than ours and we can rest peacefully and secure in this knowledge now and at the hour of our death.

With 1/3 of the our Medicare budget spent during the last year of life and 80% of that during the last month, how we embrace death is not only a religious issue. It also has huge financial ramifications for the healthcare system of our country.

Unlike the vengeful God we sometimes read about in the Old Testament, in the New Testament Jesus revealed that God is loving and compassionate. That is who awaits us with arms open wide. When we believe this in the depths of our being, then we too can smile at death.

*I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:38-39

Next month I will examine scripture, religion and fear.

~PB