

**September 21, 2008**

***Bon Voyage sermon on dealing with death and dying***

I have to tell you, I have thought long and hard about today's message. I am doing a series on "God's answers to life's tough questions" and I had planned to talk today about being down or sad. But as you by now know, today is a very special day in the life of one of our church members. This afternoon we are having a bon voyage party for Paul Meeko. Paul is dying from Pancreatic cancer. It is one of those kinds of cancers that is hard to detect, and usually by time you have symptoms at all it is too late. But pancreatic cancer is unique in my experience in that the person who is dying looks pretty good. they are able to be up and about and doing things for months...until the end when they go very quickly.

So, I wanted to talk for a few moments about dying today. I am dying. Don't worry, you are dying too. We are all going to die, it is only a matter of when and how. We live in a culture that sort of denies that death happens at all. The culture is grief phobic...when people express emotion, others are uncomfortable. People speak of someone who cries as 'breaking down", and someone who holds all their emotions in is someone who holds up. And there is little patience in our culture for taking the time necessary to truly grieve. After a month, folks are ready for us to get on with our lives.

One of the things that surprised me when I first entered the ministry, now some 30 years ago, is that people die. All kinds of people from all walks of life...and when they die, they call me. It has been a great privilege to be part of people's journey from this life to the next. Very early on I learned that there are some things I could not make better, and often there was nothing to be said or done expect being with people. Being with them physically and spiritually and emotionally as they move through their own deaths or the death of a love done. It is a

rare and great privilege and through the process I have learned a lot about living and dying.

So today I am going off message to talk about dying. When you know that you are dying, it is difficult to be sure. There is fear and worry...often more about the process of actually dying (the illness) rather than death itself...and there is often a question of why me, why now. Knowing you are going to die is also a great gift and a unique opportunity. It is hard, yes, but you have a chance to do some things you need to do, to say what you need to say...to try and prepare for your death and help others prepare for it too. I have known many, many who have walked this path, including some from our own family...Susan's sister Barbara and most recently my father. So, here are some lessons learned sharing the last days of their lives.

First, make peace. Part of this is being willing to acknowledge that you are indeed dying, and to talk about it. It is, as I said, a unique opportunity. But there are some few who refuse to take advantage of the time it allows. They go on pretending like nothing is happening and everything is going to be ok. Sometimes they pretend because they are afraid of hurting their loved ones by talking about it, and sometimes they are afraid to deal with their own grief and loss. Yes, when you are dying you grieve...in anticipation of your own death and the losses it brings. You will no longer be with your family, your work, etc. there are things you have not accomplished and some you wish you hadn't... Make peace with yourself and peace with God. This comes to us through Jesus our Lord, who loves us and saves us. We are not saved by our own efforts toward perfection...good thing! We are saved by grace through faith.

Now that you know you are dying, take the time to make your peace with Jesus. How is your relationship with him? Have you talked to him lately? Do you take your faith for granted and just keep on getting by...now is the time to get real with God. To talk things

through...to seek forgiveness and to forgive yourself. You have to come to the moment of grace, where you accept that you are loved and accepted and forgiven...and where you can forgive yourself too.

Be honest with God. Shout, cry, yell...express your fear, your anger, your hurt and your grief. Get it out and let Jesus heal it. don't worry about offending God, about praying with religious language and great flowery words. Look to the psalms, the prayers of the Bible. They are honest and sometime raw. 1/3 of them are laments, where the writer pours out his frustration, anger and hurt to God...and where they find the grace of God big enough to cover it all.

And make peace with others. Forgive, as you have been forgiven. Now is the time to bury the hatchet, to forgive the slight or the hurt. How petty and unimportant most of our grudges become when we know we are dying. What does it matter what he said or she said...

2. Caper diem... Make the most of the days you have, knowing that each day is a gift from God. Find the joy in everyday things. When you know you are dying, ice cream tastes even more wonderful! How beautiful the sunset, the rose bud, the smile of a loved one. we go through life on auto pilot most of the time, never noticing what is around us. We take each day for granted and the truth is...THIS IS THE DAY THE LORD HAS MADE, LET US REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN IT...in it, not in tomorrow, or next year or next decade...today. When you know your dying, you can really begin to live every day to the fullest. And what a joy it is, what a wonderful, wonderful world we live in.

3. Caper Family...seize your family! Your close friends. Share something deeply. Talk to them about how you feel, what you have appreciated, how much you care, what you hope for them. Write them a letter if you can't say it out loud.

And spend time doing just ordinary things. As I said to my dad when we found out he was dying, now you can eat all the ice cream you can hold! Make time for your family and those important to you.

5. Make provisions. Take the opportunity to put things in order. Where is the will? Do you have one and is it up to date...does it include the church? Talk about what you have done, how things are organized, what needs to take place. Hire a gardener for the next year, or a maid. When my dad was dying, he went with Virginia and they picked out a new house for her...because while married they lived on a golf course for my dad, but he knew that she needed to be closer to her kids and not living on a golf course. I was there and toured the house with them, and my dad told me that it was hard to do this because he knew that he would never live there...but that it was what Virginia would need and he wanted to get as much done for her as he could before he died. He sold their RV, and did a lot of other little things so she would be set.

Talk about your wishes...what you want in your funeral, how you want to be buried or cremated or whatever.

6. Live until you die. The famous reformer Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew that the Lord was coming back tomorrow...that the world was going to end. He thought for a moment and then said that he would go out and plant a tree today.

What a dump answer...plant a tree? A tree takes years to grow. But that was his point. Luther was saying that he would live his life unchanged, and that he would do something for the future, something hopeful.

Bucket list...what is that?

Something made famous recently by a movie with Jack Nickleson and Morgan Freeman. Show clip.

Do a few things you always wanted to do...depending on your health and your frame of mind...

Movie clip 2

Doesn't have to be something huge. I remember taking Susan's sister Barbara and her family to the beach for a picnic, one of the last things she did before she became bed ridden. What a joyful expression on her face as she watched her daughter play in the sand!

And I will never forget talking to Barbara about her faith. We were talking about a relative who was so sour and grumpy all the time, and Barbara said that the relatives view of God was one where God was harsh and judgmental and full of punishment and wrath. And then she said with a beautiful smile, "boy is she going to be surprised." This from a 33 year old woman with a 3 year old dying from cancer. She knew God to be joyful and loving and kind, and she waited to go home to be with him.

We are told that the sufferings of this age are not worth comparing to the glories that God has in store for us...eye has not heard, ear has not heard and the mind of man has not even imagined the glories to come.

For us, to be apart from the body is to be a home with the Lord, which is better by far! For there God himself will live among us and we will be his children...and he will wipe every tear from your eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be crying or mourning or pain of any kind any more...for the former things have passed away, and behold, God makes all things new.

We grieve, but not without hope. For we believe and hope in Christ Jesus who rose from the dead to show us that life conquers death and there is for us a life eternal...

For me to live is Christ, to die is gain...for to be apart from the body is to be at home with the Lord, which is better by far!