

## Accepting Death

Mark 14:1-8

Mark 14:16-25

Accepting death, our own or that of our loved ones, may be the hardest thing we do in life. Death is hard to watch, hard to understand and even harder to explain. If you need this sermon point verified, confirmed----and I know you liberal Baptists don't swallow or rubber stamp any thing any preacher says----and good for you---but if you need this sermon point verified just ask anyone who has tried to explain death to a child? You can teach them how to "use the John". You can potty train them. You can teach them their ABC's and how to count. You can teach them to share and to play well with others. You can teach them "God is good. God is great." or "Good food. Good grub. Good God, let's eat." You can teach them to pull their shorts up so they don't parade around with their clothes hanging at half mast. You can teach them table manners. You can teach them not to talk with food in their mouth, but teaching them about death----teaching them about death is a lesson that has no good lesson plans.

(Lesson plans. I just love using analogies to suck up to public school teachers.)

If you have ever attempted the Herculean, formidable, daunting task of discussing death with a little girl or little boy, raise your hand.

A 5-year-old at the beach ran up to his grandpa, grabbed his hand, and led him to the shore. There a sea gull lay dead in the sand.

Grandpa, what happened to him?" the little boy asked.

"He died and went to heaven," the grandfather replied.

The boy thought for a moment, and then asked, "And God threw him back down?"

Children have a way of messing up our simplistic answers to complex questions, don't they?

Death is hard to understand and hard to accept, a hard lesson to learn. At least for most of us.

A woman's husband dies. She has only \$20,000 to her name. After everything is done at the funeral home and cemetery, she tells her closest friend that she has no money left. The friend says, "How can that be? You told me you still had \$20,000 left just a few days before your husband died. How could you be broke?"

The widow says, "Well, the funeral home cost me \$5,000. And of course, I had to make the obligatory donation to the church, so that was another \$5,000. The rest went for the memorial stone."

The friend says, "\$10,000 for the memorial stone? Gracious, how big was it?"

Extending her left hand, the widow says, "About three carats."

So maybe death is not that hard for some people, people who get "a memorial stone," but it is for most of us.

Death, her own death, apparently was not all that difficult for one of my favorite theologians. Is anyone aware of Erma Bombeck's requested gravestone epitaph:-----"These are the words Erma wanted inscribed on her tombstone: "Big deal! I'm used to dust." [As quoted in Context (1 May 1993), 6.]

The Bible tells us that life is extremely brief. The Old Testament describes time as: "swifter than a weaver's shuttle" (Job 7:6 NRSV). A Psalmist describes our life as "a tale that is told" (Psalm 90:9 KJV). Isaiah puts it this way: "grass [that] withers, the flower [that] fades" (Isaiah 40:7-8 NRSV). The author of James writes: "For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away" (James 4:14 NKJV).

Hard to accept, especially as you watch your dying Dad no longer respond to your mother's touch, your mother's words of love, your mother's kiss.

John Killinger tells about a woman in one of his parishes who was dying of cancer. When Killinger visited her in the hospital near the end of her days, she confided: "I'm ready to go, but I'm not ready to leave."

[--From the notebook of John Killinger, "The Back Page," Leadership 14 (Summer 1993), 138.]

Ready to go but not ready to leave. That sounds like Jesus as recorded in Mark's gospel. I am not going to be on this earth too much longer. Indeed, the time is growing short for me, says Jesus. But also----but also "Let this cup pass from me."

I am not a big fan of Jesus knew this and Jesus knew that religion. Hey, we are told Jesus admitted he didn't even know the time of the so-called end. And yet, whatever way you slice it, whether you go with divine foreknowledge, or you go with a gut sense explanation, the gospels tell us that Jesus fully expected his death, that he accepted his death. Others didn't seem to have a clue about it or were in so much denial they couldn't face it,----and from my recent experience I can certainly see how someone could deny an approaching death----but early on----very early on, at least Jesus recognizes, accepts, deals with his approaching death. And he knew what kind of death it would be. He knew it would be a hard, horrific death. Roman crucifixions were not infrequent in Jesus' neck of the woods.

He knew and that's why when a woman put an expensive ointment on his feet and Jesus said, "she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial."

He knew. That's why when it was evening, he came with the twelve, and while they were eating---while they were partaking of bread and drinking from the cup----he spoke of his death. "Truly, ----truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until----until I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Accepting death-----Jesus did it, and so must we. What exactly does that mean? What does that entail? What does that involve?

I just watched my father die but I wouldn't want to come across as an authority on the subject of death. All deaths are different. And I do not want to imply there is a right way or a wrong way to accept death. Death is hard enough without worrying about doing it right. But I do know this: death happens and we are forced to----evening if we are kicking and screaming and crying our eyes out we are forced to accept it. And one of the most difficult things, at least with my father's death, one of the things that forced us to accept it was losing contact. Now it's hard----it's real hard the whole time they are actively dying, but as long as they recognize you, as long as they respond to you, there's something to hang onto. But when your mother desperately seeks a response by saying she loves your Dad and desperately seeks a response by squeezing his hand and desperately seeks a response by crawling up beside him and kissing his face and there's nothing, absolutely nothing-----reality sets in and forces you-----forces you to accept death.

When Jesus met with his disciples for what we call the Last Supper, and it really wasn't the last Supper, thank God for Easter and that it wasn't the last Supper, but when Jesus met with the disciples to eat I believe he knew he would be dead in a matter of days. You don't do the things he did without getting yourself strung up.

And so there they are at this meal before Jesus' death. And being an Ayers, and there's a lot entailed with being an Ayers, but being an Ayers I, myself, are interested in the food for this meal, what's on the menu, what's on the table, what is being served, what's the special for the day? We Ayers like our food.

The gospels do not tell us everything we want to know. And they do not always agree. For example, John goes out of his way to indicate the last supper was not---was not a Passover meal. Mark says it was a Passover meal and if Mark is correct we pretty much know the menu for the meal. But would you permit me to engage in a little fantasy.

With death before you lose contact with your loved one, with death you try----you try ever so hard to meet your loved one's requests, including food requests. Our Hospice nurse shared with us that frequently a dying person right before their death will ask for their favorite food. Right before his death, Dad ate nothing. Right before that, though, my father asked for Bojangles. "Bring me a Bojangles biscuit."

What if, what if at that last meal Jesus, knowing he was about to die, what if Jesus among his friends, having accepted his death ate his favorite food?

[Go to communion table. Pick up Bojangles biscuit.]

Knowing he was going to die, Jesus broke the bread and said, "This is my body, broken for you."

[Pick up cup.]

Knowing he was going to die, having accepted his approaching death, Jesus took a cup and said, “This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”