

“The Time To Come”

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UCC at The Villages
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Jeremiah 32:1-3^a, 6-15

Luke 16:19-31

‘The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom.

The rich man also died and was buried.’

Luke 16:22

Let us pray... O God,

Help us not to be afraid of death, except to challenge us to live more fully each day,
showing forth love. Amen

We are very blessed to have an active inter-faith community in The Villages-area –
especially in consideration of the recent panel discussion

on the subject of “Death”. [Oh, BTW, this was not a ‘death panel’]

There were clergy representing the Lutherans, Episcopalians, Unitarians, the Baha’i,
the Jews, as well as myself for the UCC.

There is an excellent article summarizing the discussion and it has been posted
on the information kiosk in the Narthex.

We were all fairly surprised to learn that our views generally converged.

In the United Church of Christ on Sunday mornings,

I venture to say that most of our preachers don’t usually talk about ‘death’.

Speaking for myself, my focus is generally about the Kingdom possibilities
‘on Earth as it is in Heaven’.

I don’t push the notion that Jesus Christ is the ‘only way’ to Heaven –

I never accepted the ‘One Way’ notion that only Christians are ‘saved’,

yet I believe there really is only one way – and *that* is the Way of love,
the Spirit of love which Christ personified.

Today, I thought I’d talk about some of the questions discussed by this panel.

First question is, “What is death and is it a portal to the afterlife?”

As to ‘what is death’, there are several definitions of death, including:
clinical death, brain death, legal death, and permanent death.

When a person’s heart and breathing have stopped, we are “clinically dead”,
but with the advent of CPR and other methods, we can be resuscitated.

If a physician determines there is no hope of restarting a person’s heart and lungs,
that person can be declared “legally dead”,

allowing “Do Not Resuscitate” [DNR] orders to be implemented.

“Permanent death” is when there is no activity and no option of resuscitation.

A person who is “brain dead” – though their heart and lungs are still working,

may be pronounced “legally dead”, but some courts will not allow DNR orders
to be carried out with regard for a family’s religious beliefs.

Willard, p.2

Terry Schiavo's situation almost ten years ago here in Florida,
was a case in point.

This was a very sad situation where Terry's husband was vigorously challenged
in court by his wife's family who did not want to end her life support
on religious grounds.

It is important to have this conversation with family and friends about what to do
with regard to DNR orders, advance directives, and living wills.

Please talk to our parish nurse, Becky Dunning, if you have questions about this.

Though it is important to strive to be alive,
yet, I believe, it is an act of faith to see that death is a natural part of life.
One moment, a person is breathing and talking, the next moment they're gone,
though their body is still here.

In the natural world, according to physics, when energy is transferred,
it goes somewhere, but where did that energy go?

As to whether death is a portal to the afterlife,
we have to take it on faith that there is more to this life than we know
and the faithful choice is to trust the process.

As it says in I Corinthians 2:6-13,

*"No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love [God]."*

Second question: What happens after death?

Is there a purgatory, heaven or hell?

Does our experience in the afterlife depend upon how we lived in this life?

Is there a judgment day?

The UCC observes two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion.

In the ritual of Baptism, death is simulated as a person passes through waters
to re-emerge, born again into new life.

We are born into a new life of the spirit in this world,
anticipating our resurrection in the time to come.

Popular belief about near death experiences,
speak of going through a long corridor toward a light,
often meeting loved ones who already passed on from before.

At the threshold of the gate of light, there is a human figure, sometimes Jesus,
who then sends them back to Earthly life.

For those who pass beyond the gates it is unknown what happens then –
though we might guess...

We are given very few visions of what the afterlife is about
from the Bible – but I expect we will all be pleasantly surprised.

Willard, p.3

In Jesus' parables, he speaks of God's Kingdom of Heaven as
a tree where many kind of birds make their nests,
a heavenly banquet, even as a house with many mansions...

*So, a person arrives at the gates of Heaven and St. Peter asks,
"What is your religion?"*

The man says, "Jewish."

St. Peter looks down his list, and says,

"Go to Gate 24, but be very quiet as you pass Gate 4."

Another person arrives at the gates of heaven and St. Peter asks, "Your religion?"

That person answers, "Lutheran."

St. Peter says, "Go to Gate 17, but be very quiet as you pass Gate 4."

The next person arrives at the gates and St. Peter asks, "Your religion?"

and this person answers, "United Church of Christ."

St. Peter says, "Go to Gate 11, but be very quiet as you pass Gate 4."

The UCC person says,

*"I can understand there being different places
for different religions and denominations,
but why must I be quiet when I pass Gate 4?"*

St. Peter tells him,

*"Well the Baptists are inside Gate 4,
and they think they're the only ones here."*

<http://jimsomerville.wordpress.com/2010/10/07/an-old-joke-and-the-new-jerusalem/>

There is speculation about how some scriptures can be interpreted
in which a person does not enter Heaven right away –
that there is a time of sleep until the end of all things,
when all of us come to stand before the throne of God on Judgment Day.
Jesus speaks of this in Matthew 25 when there will be such a day of judgment –
a sorting out of sheep from goats and this is related to
how well someone demonstrates concern for the least of these –
the minority in our midst,
how well we allow love to work in our lives.

In today's parable of Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham
and the rich man in the place of constant thirst and suffering,
there is a chasm between them –
the rich man can no longer tell Lazarus what to do.
Nevertheless, Lazarus and the rich man are present with one another.
There is something comforting in that.
We are not so bad that we are totally cut off from one another as human beings,
yet protected from any further coercion or abuse of the Earthly life.

Willard, p.4

The rich man still didn't get it – he was still trying to take advantage of Lazarus;
Though he was still blind to his sin – his failure to love,
it seems like he was changing as he sought to warn others alive on Earth.

There are no demons in Jesus' parable, no devil running things in a place called hell.
The Apostle Paul speaks of 'powers and principalities' at work in this world
and the next, but we are protected from any direct intrusions.

Our problem is not the devil, our problem is sin – our own capacity for evil.
I don't believe there is a hell, but I believe we have to pass through 'fires of truth',
we have to face our grief and guilt, pain and shame – either now or later;
and God helps us to do this, because God loves us.

All that is not love burns away, and what is left is like gold proven by fire.

I Corinthians 13 basically says this – things of this world pass away –
they come to an end, but love endures.

Now, it is like looking in a mirror where we only see our world reflected,
but someday, we will see God face to face –

We will know all there is to know, as fully as we are known.

So, assuming we will know everything one day...

what if that meant you found out if only you bought one more lottery ticket,
you'd have won the jackpot... now, wouldn't that be hell?

Third question: Should death be feared?

A Native American friend of mine, who was active in the UCC
with the Council of American Indian Ministries, once told me,
"I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Well, what if there was no death? What if people couldn't die...

and they lived lives of unrelenting pain?

Death in such circumstances would come as a gift.

We are all meant to die and life is meant to be this way –

is meant to come to death as we blossom and grow,

bear fruit in a variety of ways,

before all the leaves like the powers of youth, fall away, at last,

to wither and die – then, to make room for the next generation.

There is a beauty to it all that allows each of us to get our shot

to make the most of their lives – or not.

The best that we can, may not be all that we can.

But in the end, we can be grateful for the brief and beautiful gift that life is.

When I get word that someone has died, I generally sit with the family and ask them
to tell me the story of their loved one's life –

what did that person love and why are they loved.

Willard, p.5

Always there is something funny that happened in someone's life
and I try to get people to laugh at least once when I deliver a eulogy,
because humor is healing – it is an act of defiance against death.
Jesus himself used humor to help his disciples cope with his death
and realize his resurrection.

At memorial services in my eulogies, I sometimes make a point
to use some special remembrance in an imaginative way to visualize what
the loved one would be doing in Heaven.

For many of you, I think the idea of playing golf on endless fields of clouds,
stretching out to an infinite sunrise would be your idea of Heaven.

For me, Heaven will be like a walk into deep forest –
so deep that you can't see through to the end of it,
except as the sun shining through the trees;
and the farther in you go, the more you discover, without fear of being lost.

I found that death made me angry – perhaps still does.

I think that is because it robs me of people I love.

I suppose I also fear it as fear of the unknown.

In I John 4:18, it says...

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.

So, I'll just keep trying to show love – I believe that is the best any of us can do.

As the Golden Rule Says, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' –
but in The Sermon The Mount, Jesus quite literally, adds, "or else".

Forgive us our sins as we would be forgiven of our sins.

Love – or else. Is that so hard?

Well, yes. But then there is forgiveness, too.

If you accept that much about life, then that is what it should mean to accept Christ.

Accept Jesus for what he is about. So, claim it.

A friend of mine who's a storyteller once asked me, "What happens when we die?"

And I thought a better question for him to ask would be,

"What will Heaven be like?"

I believe all who love will walk through the gates of Heaven

like it was a cool spring afternoon, and someday,

we'll all meet again and dance like the birds on the clouds...

Amen

Our lesson today from Jeremiah 32:1-3^a, 6-15 describes the time of the final siege of the southern Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians. Even so, Jeremiah purchases some property, demonstrating his confidence that there would be a future .

32:1 The Lord spoke to me in the tenth year that Zedekiah was king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year that Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylonia.

2 At that time, the Babylonian army had surrounded Jerusalem, and I was in the prison at the courtyard of the palace guards.

3 Zedekiah had ordered me to be held there because I told everyone that the Lord had said: I am the Lord, and I am about to let the king of Babylonia conquer Jerusalem.

6 Later, when I was in prison, the Lord said:

7 Jeremiah, your cousin Hanamel, the son of your uncle Shallum, will visit you.

He must sell his field near the town of Anathoth, and because you are his nearest relative, you have the right and the responsibility to buy it and keep it in the family.

8 Hanamel came, just as the Lord had promised. And he said, "Please buy my field near Anathoth in the territory of the Benjamin tribe. You have the right to buy it, and if you do, it will stay in our family."

The Lord had told me to buy it 9 from Hanamel, and so I did.

The price was seventeen pieces of silver, and I weighed out the full amount on a scale.

10-11 I had two copies of the bill of sale written out, each containing all the details of our agreement.

Some witnesses and I signed the official copy, which was folded and tied, before being sealed shut with hot wax.

Then I gave Hanamel the silver.

12 And while he, the witnesses, and all the other Jews sitting in the courtyard were still watching, I gave both copies to Baruch son of Neriah.

13-14 I told Baruch that the Lord had said:

Take both copies of this bill of sale, one sealed shut and the other open, and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time.

15 I am the Lord All-Powerful, the God of Israel, and I promise you that people will once again buy and sell houses, farms, and vineyards in this country.

Luke 16:19-31

[Jesus said,]

[19] "There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen
and who feasted sumptuously every day.

[20] And at his gate lay a poor man named Laz'arus, full of sores,

[21] who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table;
moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

[22] The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom.

The rich man also died and was buried;

[23] and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes,
and saw Abraham far off and Laz'arus in his bosom.

[24] And he called out,

`Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Laz'arus
to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue;
for I am in anguish in this flame.'

[25] But Abraham said,

`Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things,
and Laz'arus in like manner evil things;
but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.

[26] And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed,
in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able,
and none may cross from there to us.'

[27] And he said,

`Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house,

[28] for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them,
lest they also come into this place of torment.'

[29] But Abraham said,

`They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

[30] And he said,

`No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

[31] He said to him,

`If they do not hear Moses and the prophets,
neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.'"

*Questions for Tri-County Interfaith Association panel discussion
on Death and Dying*

What is death? How would you characterize it? Is it a portal to an afterlife? Is it annihilation? Is it re-birth in another human or animal form? Why do we die? What part of us survives? Is there resurrection of the body? Is there re-birth into another human or animal body? Are we instantly in the afterlife, or are we dead, to be reborn at some future time (e.g., the end of time)?

What happens at death? Is there purgatory or Sheol or Hell?

Does our experience in the afterlife or our re-birth depend upon how we lived our life? Upon our being saved? Upon judgment? If you don't believe in an afterlife, what reason is there to live a good/ethical life?

Are there important rituals before/after death?

What is acceptable disposition of the body of the deceased (e.g., burial practices, cremation)?

Too often, dying is an awful process. What changes would you like to see in the American way of death?