



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

DEATH BE NOT PROUD

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Christian

Matthew 9.18-26

*While Jesus was speaking, a ruler came and knelt in front of him, saying, "My daughter has just died. But come and place your hand on her, and she will live." So Jesus and his disciples got up and went with him. When Jesus went into the ruler's house, he saw the flute players and the distressed crowd. He said, "Go away, because the little girl isn't dead but is asleep"; but they laughed at him. After he had sent the crowd away, Jesus went in and touched her hand, and the little girl rose up. News about this spread through that whole region.*

Hindu

Bhagavad-Gita 2.19-25

*You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. You are part of that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn and unchanging. As a person abandons worn-out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the Self, who lives within.*

Death has been a mystery since the evolution of the human race. Attendant rituals, as ancient as the humanity, have served to assuage the travail and grief that surrounds death, providing activities and philosophies to aid us in engaging the mystery that is death. Monuments large and small mark graves to offer some remembrance of those who have passed for future generations. In Ireland, the Newgrange Passage Graves were constructed over 5,000 years ago in such a way that for 20 minutes each year at the winter solstice the sun enters the tomb to shine directly on the gravesite as a way of symbolically piercing darkness and death with the hope of light and life. They are marvels of engineering, like the pyramids of Egypt, witnessing to the human fascination with, and coping mechanisms of, the mystery of death.

That today is the Ides of March is not lost on those familiar with the warning to Caesar to beware of the perils of death. That this is the season of Lent in the Christian calendar is not lost on those serious in their intentions to be mindful of our own mortality even as we are invited to bask in the sunlight of Easter resurrection. Lent is the time we remind ourselves that life is defined by death; to keep death at bay as long as we can, we take up exercise, a healthy diet, make regular trips to the doctor, wear seat belts, drive safely and otherwise order our lives around that which keeps us alive. We are inborn with a natural instinct to avoid death. Yet paradoxically, we were born dying. Every day that we grow and mature takes us one day closer to death. It is the natural process of life on this

planet and something which every living entity must face, though humans, because we anticipate death more than the lower animals, fear it the more.

Pundits have brought the lighter side of the subject to help take the edge off things. Woody Allen quips: "I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens." Groucho Marx said "I intend to live forever, or die trying," which he ultimately did. Steve Jobs takes a more realistic and philosophical point of view as he considered his own death:

No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.

That's all well and good, as far as it goes for old folks, but when death visits the young, it's a different matter. Matthew's story about Jesus raising the little girl at her father's request is a story of hope even though it doesn't happen that way for all of us. Here we find divine compassion in the most difficult of life's circumstances reminding us of a certain joy that pervades life and death, this side and the other side of the grave.

Paul reiterates this with his words to the church at Corinth: Death where is your victory? Grave where is your sting? Death, as a natural part of the cycle of life, will take us yet into another dimension of that which God has created, and the best way to be friends with it is to live in the hope that it will be good. "We cannot banish dangers, but we can banish fears," comments David Sarnoff. "We must not demean life by standing in awe of death." A healthy verve for life on this side of death provides hope for the other side.

Mark Twain, in his less cynical mood, expresses it this way:

"I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it... The fear of death follows from the fear of life. [One] who *lives* fully is prepared to die at any time."

The Hindu holy book, the Bhagavad-Gita, states it this way:

You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. You are part of that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn and unchanging. As a person abandons worn-out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the Self, who lives within.

The story of the ruler's daughter raised to new life provides insight into living if not into death. That God is the God of life is evident in what Jesus did in turning the finality of death upside down by bringing the girl to life. It is sheer poetry of the highest, holy order. God created us to be alive, and Jesus, in wanting to engage people in this realm, this kingdom, of God that provides abundant life, demonstrates here and in his own resurrection, that nothing can separate us from the love or the life of God. Not even death; and if not death, then certainly not our failures, our mistakes, our stupidity or our blatant rejection. By bringing this little girl back into the realm of the living, Jesus demonstrates to the mourners that since God is the God of all, even death, then we can give ourselves over to the sheer joy of living.

Even so, death's sting is great; it's seeming finality and the silencing of a spirit, a voice, a person, a body in the realm of this world is difficult for us to bear. I can't imagine what the parents and families and close friends of those two bright young people who died so tragically a few days ago are going through this weekend as they must endure the funerals and burials of their children. Nor do I intend in any way to gloss over any reality of death by suggesting that God's intention for life eradicates the agonizing, gut-wrenching pain that accompanies a death, of anyone, young or old.

But what we can take away from the story, as it intersects with our reality, is that we can trust the mystery even in our most life-threatening pain. We are caught in a paradox, like those mourners in the ruler's house, wanting to believe but trapped in the pain that keeps us from knowing. The chasm between life and death, doubting and trusting, knowing and unknowing is a thin but cloudy veil that is bridged by faith, and the hope that life is good on either side.

Eric Fromm reminds us that "to spare oneself from grief at all cost can be achieved only at the price of total detachment, which excludes the ability to experience happiness." Again the paradox escapes our finite minds. But happiness in life, as God would have it, rests on the trust that whatever it is that follows in the next dimension of life, will be at least as good as this one. And I firmly believe that the good life that exists beyond this one will include everyone, not just those who follow Jesus or who are religious or who are righteous, but everyone. No exceptions.

A friend of mine told me some weeks after we buried his young wife that while he was walking one day not knowing what else to do in his deep despair, he suddenly saw her standing in front of him, laughing and telling him she was fine. It eased his mind, if not his loss, to be able to go on living. I don't know if that story gives me anything more concrete to hang my hat of faith on than does the story of Jesus raising the little girl from death, but they are indicators of something good. They point the way to life in death, even without explaining it, proving it, or otherwise guaranteeing it.

No one knows what happens when we die. Religionists try to convince us they know. But they're not dead, so they don't know any more than I do. As Martin Forward has said:

The wise in every generation have been careful not to describe overmuch the joys of heaven or the pains of hell. Death is this life's last great adventure into uncharted territories; it is the supreme mystery, and so demands and deserves our silence rather than inane chattering. Better to say too little than too much, and to say it in faith and hope and love, not in knowledge.

I conclude without many answers, and with perhaps more questions than certainties, but I do so with the words of the English metaphysical poet John Donne who penned these lines in 1609 during a severe illness that brought him close to death:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy [drug] or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

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