

In Life and in Death, We Belong to God

John 11:32-44

All Saints Sunday – November 3, 2024

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Many of us learned a bedtime prayer as children: *Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

How many of you prayed this prayer while growing up? I did too. Did you know that it was brought to America by the Puritans, and it might go all the way back to the 9th century? As I see it, the prayer is an expression of childlike trust in the face of life's uncertainties. It's meant to assure children that no matter what happens, they will remain in God's good care.

So, how many of you still pray this prayer from time to time? It wouldn't surprise me if you did. There's something comforting about it. In its own way, it's a reflection of today's theme: In life and in death, we belong to God.

You may know that at times this prayer has been revised: *Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Guard me safely through the night, and wake me with the morning light.* We can understand this change. We have modern health care, with emergency rooms and antibiotics. Life isn't quite as fragile as it once was. Parents rightfully wonder if they want to send healthy, happy kids off to bed with worries that they might not make it through the night. And I'm not sure parents want to think about such things either.

In 1973, Ernst Becker wrote a challenging book called *The Denial of Death*. One of Becker's main points is that we as a culture regularly deny the reality of death. We use euphemisms such as "passed away" or "expired." We put off going to the doctor. We don't make funeral plans. We don't get around to writing a will. And sadly, we sometimes lose touch with those who've lost a loved one because, quite frankly, we don't know what to say. Death is difficult. Sometimes it's easier just to avoid it.

Shortly after I started serving at Zumbro in Rochester, I was riding in procession to the cemetery for a burial. The funeral director was driving. We went by the Mayo Clinic. The director informed me that several years before they weren't allowed to go down Third Avenue and past the Mayo Clinic. In fact, they weren't allowed to go anywhere near the Clinic with the hearse. The

powers-that-be thought it reflected poorly on their health care. They wanted their patients thinking positive thoughts, not negative ones.

That makes sense to us. Positive thinking can be beneficial in getting well. Yet try as we may, we cannot altogether avoid the subject of death. We see people digging through the rubble in Gaza, frantically searching for survivors. Or closer to home, we hear of brain tumors or pancreatic cancer or Alzheimer's. The closer death gets, it seems, the more real it becomes.

The subject of death came up in our reading from John. Truth be told, I don't think it was any easier for them than it is for us. The death involved a friend of Jesus named Lazarus. Jesus had been to Lazarus' home in Bethany. He knew his sisters, Mary and Martha. It's a touching story, but like a lot of the stories in John, it's full of twists and turns. Early in the chapter, Jesus is told that Lazarus is sick. Yet instead of coming right away, Jesus delays for a couple of days. We're not told why. It's almost as if he has some greater purpose in mind.

Lazarus ends up dying. Jesus misses the funeral. By the time he gets there, Mary and Martha are more than a little put out with him. They both say the same thing, but at different times: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" Clearly, they're convinced that the one who opened the eyes of the blind could have kept their brother from dying. They're overcome with grief. *Lord, why weren't you here when we needed you most?*

We know that feeling. When we lose someone we love, we often rework the events over and over in our minds. If only we had acted sooner... If only we had prayed more... If only the doctors had tried this or that... And sometimes, when we're deeply discouraged, we say what Mary and Martha were thinking: *Lord, why weren't you here when we needed you most?*

One of the intriguing parts of this story for me is the raw display of emotion. Jesus openly grieves. His heart is broken over the loss of his friend. The verbs in Greek are strong, and our translation doesn't do justice to them. Jesus was not only "greatly disturbed"; he was angry at the reality of death. He was not only "deeply moved" by those in mourning; he was visibly agitated. Grief is painful, often extremely painful.

Whatever else is going on in this story, Jesus seems to want a face-to-face encounter with death itself. The gloves are off. The euphemisms are set aside.

Either Jesus has power over death or he does not. But there's no backing down. He shouts in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" In that moment hangs the balance between life and death, between this world and the next. Miraculously, Lazarus comes forth from the tomb. And those who witness the event are not sure what to believe.

We have to be careful in talking about this story. This is not resurrection. It's more closely akin to resuscitation. Lazarus gets a second chance at life, but someday he will die again. I find myself wondering: Is his life different than before? Is it better? Deeper? Richer? A part of me hopes that it is, that Lazarus is less afraid in the face of death, and more trusting of the future Jesus promises.

Today is All Saints Sunday. In the midst of a culture that often avoids death, we in the church bring it up. We remember those who have died in the faith. We have not forgotten them. It's a day that's both incredibly sad and yet hopeful. It's sad, because we miss these people. Death is hard. No matter what anyone says, we don't get over our grief in a month or two, or even a year or two. In a very real sense, it's something we carry with us for the rest of our lives.

On the other hand, this day is hopeful because we trust that Jesus has been there ahead of us. He has stood face to face with death. And in faith, we dare to believe that Jesus is who he says he is...the resurrection and the life.

The church is at its best, I think, when we're standing side by side with those who are grieving. We're not always sure what to say. Sometimes it's better not to say too much. Rather, we pledge to be there for each other: to give hugs, to listen attentively, to make casseroles, to show up at funerals, to not try to fix anything, but simply to look death squarely in the face and not to avoid it.

Our passage from Hebrews is encouraging. It says that as we're running the race set before us, we're surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses." They are cheering us on. I love that image. It suggests that we will never forget those who've joined the great cloud of witness, nor are they very far away.

Today we remember loved ones like Alverna Ehlert whose nickname was Gramzie, and who was known as a feisty German and that might be why she lived to be 100. We remember Ruth Rankin who was a loving mother and grandmother, and was always ready to babysit little Cody. We remember June

Quade who learned perseverance during the Great Depression and for a good many years worked at Stampers deboning chicken. We remember Lois Christenson who used her talents to become a county home health assistant, regularly tending to people's needs. We remember Bill Harnack who oversaw Wells Public Utilities and was regularly heard to say, "If it needs to be done and you have the ability, then you need to do it."

We remember Diana Burns who loved to take up needle and thread and sew clothes for her children, including matching Barbie doll clothes for the girls. We remember Arnie Carlson who was always making friends, encouraging people, and arranging events, making a mark through his farm management program. We remember Emily Malakowsky who worked side by side with her husband for over thirty years on their dairy farm, and who always gave more than she received. We remember Dennis Tyrrell who loved classic cars and arranged many memorable vacations with his family. We remember Deb Willner who was on the go and full of life during most of her 71 years, but who could never quite get all her projects finished. We remember Ruth Heggen who was creative and kindhearted, and who wrote dozens of poems expressing her faith and love. And finally, we remember Tim Walters who quietly spent decades repairing scratched and dented auto bodies and making them look new again.

All these stories and more fill us with a profound sense of gratitude. They tug at our hearts and reinforce the feeling that life is never quite long enough, and it's often filled with uncertainty. We do not know what tomorrow will bring. We regularly need the assurance that no matter what happens, in life and in death, we belong to God.

Friends, if you're looking for that assurance for yourself, I have an idea. Why not try the older version of that childhood prayer, with one little addition? *Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. And if I live another day, I pray the Lord to guide my way. Amen.*