

# **Befriending Death**

## **Sermon 10/7/18**

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#### **1 Corinthians 15:35-49**

<sup>35</sup> But someone may ask, “How will the dead be raised? What kind of bodies will they have?” <sup>36</sup> What a foolish question! When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn’t grow into a plant unless it dies first. <sup>37</sup> And what you put in the ground is not the plant that will grow, but only a bare seed of wheat or whatever you are planting. <sup>38</sup> Then God gives it the new body he wants it to have. A different plant grows from each kind of seed. <sup>39</sup> Similarly there are different kinds of flesh—one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.

<sup>40</sup> There are also bodies in the heavens and bodies on the earth. The glory of the heavenly bodies is different from the glory of the earthly bodies. <sup>41</sup> The sun has one kind of glory, while the moon and stars each have another kind. And even the stars differ from each other in their glory. <sup>42</sup> It is the same way with the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. <sup>43</sup> Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength.

<sup>44</sup> They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, there are also spiritual bodies. <sup>45</sup> The Scriptures tell us, “The first man, Adam, became a living person. But the last Adam—that is, Christ—is a life-giving Spirit. <sup>46</sup> What comes first is the natural body, then the spiritual body comes later. <sup>47</sup> Adam, the first man, was made from the dust of the earth, while Christ, the second man, came from heaven. <sup>48</sup> Earthly people are like the earthly man, and heavenly people are like the heavenly man.

<sup>49</sup> Just as we are now like the earthly man, we will someday be like the heavenly man.

#### **Message:**

Back in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s there was an eighty-year-old widow named Naomi Miller, who never missed a Sunday when it came to worship. One Sunday before worship I came up to her and commended her for her faithfulness in worship attendance. “Well,” she said, “it’s not that hard. I wake up in the morning, and while eating my breakfast I like to read my newspaper, I turn to the obituary, and if my name is not listed there then I know it’s time for me to get off to worship.”

Jeffrey Kluger writes in *The View*, of September 17<sup>th</sup> Time magazine. “If life wanted to mess with you, it couldn’t have come up with a better way than death. Especially the lead-up. Your strength flags; your world narrows; much of what once gave you pleasure, and satisfaction is now gone.” I can relate!

My father in his later years was much like Naomi. It seemed like every conversation would begin, “Do you remember, he then rattled off a series of names that he thought Debbie and I should be familiar with; as we struggled to remember, he would add, “well they died.”

Over the years I have been a frequent observer of death. I have participated in scores of funerals, sat by the bedside of others preparing to pass from this life to the next. I even had to accompany a family to the morgue to identify their loved one’s remains. My first real traumatizing encounter with death was the death of my 16-year-old sister, Julie. While playing in a neighbor’s home she experienced a seizure and died. My sister’s death in 1973 became our family’s great interruption. It had not been planned, scheduled, desired, wanted or welcomed.

Besides physical death, I have experienced institutional and relational deaths. Bethany Seminary’s location where I studied and trained as a student was located in Oak Brook, Illinois. That Bethany is now but a memory for it is now located in Richmond, Indiana. The first and second churches that I pastored experienced death so that the Providence that we now know could be born. During that time, we came to know the intense pain of separation and relational death as people moved into and out of our lives. The temptation was to avoid the pain by becoming apathetic, growing reluctant to invest emotional energy investing our time and energy in building and making new relationships. Perhaps I am not alone, when I tell you that I carry around intense emotional scars. I felt betrayal and abandonment every time someone we had loved and shared life with us moved away and departed from our life together. Do you grieve knowing that Phyllis and Garry Koppenhaver will be absent from our worship, fellowship and service? I do. If we aren’t careful our defense, as Christine reminded us in her testimony, is to build a wall around ourselves and others to guard our hearts. No one can get in but, in our efforts to avoid the grieving that accompanies death we have chosen to numb ourselves by embracing death rather than life.

The take away from Genesis is that God created us with the ability of free will, free choice. To choose light, darkness needs to exist; to choose faith, fear needs to exist, to choose love, hate must be an option. To choose life, death needs to be a reality.

I find myself saying, when I am asked how I am doing, “I have my issues, but it beats the alternative, I am fortunate to still be on this side of the grass.” What I am saying is that this world’s difficulties, temptations, illnesses and hardships are better than the reality of heaven and fellowship with Jesus. Shame on me! I am insulting God, trivializing what God has already accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God has destroyed the last enemy, death, through Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension.

For the first 60 years of my life, death, was the great disrupter, the great interrupter. I despised death, because death just like birth, I could not will it away. I could not pray it away. Death was out of my control! Many of you know that in 2013 I was threatened with a life-threatening illness. Denial was no longer an option. The great interrupter was knocking at my door. I found myself thinking about life and death and eternity in a way that I had not done before.

“Befriending Death” was the cover article on our church’s June 2016 Messenger. It contained an article written by Galen Hackman that I found to be helpful dealing with God’s choices of light, faith, love and life. Galen borrows his thoughts from Henri Nouwen who identifies the journey toward spiritual maturity as moving from “denying to befriending death.” Where we admit our mortality; making our peace with the knowledge I am going to die.

It orients our thinking and our imagining on the things that really matter, our relationship with God in Christ Jesus and what life will be like in the kingdom of God. This became all too real for me when Debbie and the health care professionals described for me my descent into septic shock and then added, “welcome back, we want you to know that few enter into septic shock and get to come back to talk about it. You are a very sick puppy.” Befriending death began with the realization that your prayers and God’s sovereignty permitted me a reprieve, that I am living on bonus time, so appreciate it, massage it and embrace it! I’ve been given a do over; for now!

We are living on bonus time. **Hebrews 9:27 reminds us that death is inevitable, we all die, we are all destined to die.**

This reality should find each one of us embracing a life of prayer where we receive the counsel and direction of the Holy Spirit to embrace the abundant life God is preparing for us. When you are needing to be in control of your life you can be assured that you have invited God out of your life. This is not abundant living! What you are accomplishing in the flesh is not of God, for you have replaced God with you. Spoiler alert, I am, and neither are you a god. As we befriend death, moving from denying death to accepting our mortality, we discover intimacy with God and others. We find ourselves prioritizing our bonus time on what really matters! God, the author and creator of life, in Christ demonstrates His power over death. God conquers death through the resurrection of Jesus. If you remember but one word from today's message, please remember the word resurrection. It describes for us God's mission and purpose. The God of the universe is about resurrecting life. Let's look at three realities of moving from denying to befriending death.

### **1. Befriending death invites me to participate in God's resurrection life.**

What became reality in Jesus continues today. God is about resurrecting what is dying to new life. Listen to the scriptures describe this process.

*"<sup>20</sup> But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. <sup>21</sup> So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. <sup>22</sup> Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life. <sup>23</sup> But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back. <sup>24</sup> After that the end will come, when he will turn the Kingdom over to God the Father, having destroyed every ruler and authority and power. <sup>25</sup> For Christ must reign until he humbles all his enemies beneath his feet. <sup>26</sup> And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. 1 Corinthians 15: 20-26 (NLT)*

It is difficult for us who are finite to imagine the infinite. As it is difficult for us in the natural to understand life in the spiritual. Paul says we can find examples of resurrection in the natural as a foretaste of what is to come in the spiritual. Hillary Felton and her grandson Will place 4 caterpillars into a plastic cage with food, water and air and one day those caterpillars disappeared. Where they once dwelled, they discover 4 monarch butterflies. The apostle Paul explains resurrection this way in 1 Corinthians 15, bury a seed into the ground. It disappears, but as God intervenes, as water and sunshine and time are added, a beautiful flower or plant appears. At death our earthly body that served us here on earth, like a seed buried and or cremated, returns to the dust that it once was before

God got intervenes. God takes our earthly body and transforms it into a resurrected spiritual body.

Think about it with me in the natural, many of us in the 90's experienced resurrection when our two former churches died, disappeared, and were resurrected by God by becoming Providence. Choosing a name Peggie testified, this was not our doing but the work of God, let us be named Providence. Does that mean that Providence will never die and go on eternally and forever? God's promise is that while Christ's church is planted on solid ground it will live eternally. But as for individual local churches, they are planted and birthed. When they lose their vitality and effectiveness they die. We may grieve their death, but God moves us from death to life through resurrection. God has not just resurrected once in Jesus and quit. Jesus Christ is the first of many resurrections. God is engaged in the resurrection business. God can't help but resurrect!

The Providence Church that I knew last December when I returned to Florida has died. In June I returned to a resurrecting Providence. As we continue to bless others, bless our community, bless Abundant Life Church; as we give ourselves away, as we act out of our faith and not out of our fear; as we embrace the love of Jesus and refuse the temptation to want to judge and give into anger and hate, and to seek self-centered happiness what we discover is that God through the Holy Spirit continually is replacing our dying with resurrecting life.

When I returned from Florida in June, I have missed but three Sundays, one in the hospital, one to witness Stefan being installed as pastor at Manoa church and one to introduce my brother to Stefan's church. I say this, not to receive your commendation, but to testify that there has not been a Sunday here where I went home wondering if God's presence has left us or departed from us. I have heard testimonies where God has met up with you in faith, I have heard the word of God applied to our contemporary lives and situations, I have experienced the love of Jesus and I have been blessed! For years I have prayed for drums on our stage that would be used by a drummer in worship to glorify God. For years it appeared as if God had not agreed with that prayer. This year I got to live to see God answering that prayer at 9:00 worship. If you set your alarm one hour earlier on Sunday morning and arrive here at 9am you can witness and get in on what God is doing here in our facility. God is using us to reverse the curse of the tower of Babel, through the cooperative ministries of Providence and Abundant Life Church. We are putting behind our differences by focusing upon our common mission of sharing the love of Jesus with a dying world. Come at 9:00 and leave at noon and you will leave with a double portion; you will be doubly blessed.

**2. Befriending death lets us see heaven as a real place.**

*“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. <sup>2</sup> There is more than enough room in my Father’s home<sup>1</sup> If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you<sup>1</sup> <sup>3</sup> When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. John 14: 1-2 (NLT)*

The NIV translates it this way *“In my Father’s house are many rooms, if it was not so I would have told you!”* Heaven is a place filled with God’s wonder and glory and much more than we can imagine. Jesus describes heaven for us by describing a picture we can imagine. He pictures heaven as a home; a place of solace and safety. Death is our doorway to our heavenly home. We sing about it, but do we mean it? *“Better is one day in Your court, better is one day in Your house, than a thousand elsewhere!”* Heaven is far better than our best day or best room here on earth.

Randy Alcorn’s book *“Heaven”* helps us see heaven as having differing dimensions. There is the heaven in which our believing loved ones now live, and there is the final heaven described for us in Revelation; descending upon a rejuvenated, sin free earth, where we live in fully rejuvenated resurrected bodies designed specifically and wonderfully for eternity.

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.” Revelation 21; 1-4 (N.L.T.)*

Resurrected ... the old order replaced by the new!

### **3. Befriending death reminds us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.**

When you feel alone, lost or deserted? Hebrews 11 describes for us a list of people who lived modeling for us lives of faith. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. Some are righteous, but many are rascals with defects, flaws and moral failures. They are not Marvel comics superheroes. They are folks that we can relate to. What they hold in common, what

sets them apart to be commended is their **Faith!** *“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Hebrews 11:1 (NLT)*

*All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it. They agreed that they were foreigners and nomads here on earth. Obviously, people who say such things are looking forward to a country they can call their own. If they had longed for the country they came from, they could have gone back. But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*  
-Hebrews 11: 13-16 NLT

Hebrews Chapter 12 reminds us that when we feel alone, remind yourself that you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Many you have never met, but some you have.

Naomi Miller lived into her 90's. She lived long enough to experience the resurrection of Providence. As many gazed backward wishing to return to their former churches' preferring to mourn their loss and death, Naomi, guided by faith, continued to read the obituary section of her newspaper and when not discovering her name came and participated in Providence's worship and service. Each Sunday she also participated in perhaps our first life group. Her group consisted of about 6 to 8 widows who gathered together after our Sunday worship at Limerick Diner for lunch. She moved into a 55 plus community in Limerick where participating in a fire drill, she fell down a flight of stairs and broke her hip placing her in a wheelchair for the rest of her earthly life. This in turn led her into a new residence, Manatawny Manor. Every time I would pay a visit to Manatawny Manor, I would find Naomi sitting in her wheelchair in their lobby greeting folks with her smile. She was intentionally choosing to be a blessing! When she saw me, she would greet me asking "how is everyone doing at church."

Naomi had a daughter, Dottie Ellis, who in her 50's was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Months before her death Dottie was observed with her camera at Seekers photographing our three groups and having each child and adult writing their names on a heart shaped paper that accompanied her three photos. Asked what she was up to, she answered, "I am sick and tired of hearing people tell me that nothing is happening around here, that there is no life, it's just not true, and now I have the evidence." Dottie was befriending death, she could see and experience a resurrecting God! Her faith was not blind faith, rather she was seeing with eyes of

faith, she was appreciating and cherishing the abundant life that God was granting her. Eyes of faith can see that we are living on bonus time; eyes of faith see God's kingdom with greater clarity; eyes of faith are focused on what matters! "Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save." Eyes of faith want to make a difference doing Godly things! Take time to visit our Mingo cemetery and there you will see the blue sign that Dottie's family purchased as memorial gift.

Buried in Mingo Cemetery is Bonnie Hashagan. For about 5 years Bonnie was Pastor Wendy's right-hand person and faithful assistant. In her late 30's Bonnie was diagnosed with a terminal cancer. Months before her death Bonnie was thinking about her kids, our kids, and she sat down and wrote them a Christmas play celebrating the birth of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Through her play Bonnie invited them to live lives that matter, prioritizing a personal faith in Jesus.

Also in the cloud of witnesses is Jack Quick who spent his last days in a summer camper next to Hill Top Diner honoring Christ and living life as a faithful follower of Jesus. Jack wanted his bonus time on earth to reflect a life saved by Jesus. He wanted Christ to be his legacy and his inheritance that he passed on to his wayward family and friends.

Also in that cloud of witnesses I heard you mentioning in your testimonies folks like Mille Alderfer, Mim Gotshall, Jim and Floss Seese, Chic Gray, Lowell Moyer, Harold & Ruth Keppen, Rachael Thompson, Alma Hoffman, Bob and Mary Miller to name just a few. They too cheer us on, root for us as we run our faith races. They are in a mystical way connected with us and with Christ, through prayer and the Holy Spirit.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up.*  
-Hebrews 12: 1-3 (NLT)

Galen Hackman adds, “I have come to think of the heaven that exists now, filled with the communion of saints, not so much as some place up there in the sky or out there in the universe, but rather a realm of life existing in a domain parallel to us. The present heaven is more alongside us than beyond us. This parallel universe exists in the spiritual realm, not the physical one.... **The cloud of witnesses is around us, beside us, as well as perhaps above us.**” This communion of the saints encourages me and sustains me and gives me something to look forward to with significant anticipation.”

As a child I had a reputation for being strong willed and a bit incorrigible. Some have said that I was a rascal. In order to save me from being killed by my mother, my Grandpa Wenger one afternoon put me into his car and we began to run errands together delivering floral arrangements designed by Wenger’s Flowers to homes in neighboring communities. We would stop at a local diner and eat a hamburger, milkshake and French fries. In the car Grandpa began telling me stories of a great crowd of witnesses, some good, some bad, some who were believers, others who we were not sure. Quite a few of them rascals just like me and him, saved by the grace of God who God transformed giving them eyes of faith. Grandpa introduced me to silly funny songs that we sang together. Songs like, “My froggy he is a queer bird, he ain’t got no tail, almost hardly, he run, and he jump, and he lands where he sits with, my froggy he is a queer bird.” Our all-time favorite became, “Row, row, row, your boat, gently down the stream, merrily, merrily merrily, merrily, **life is but a DREAM!**”

Our earthly life is but a dream. This sin-filled life, or as many of my conservative friends like to say, this earthy life filled with moral depravity and shame, ills, pains, losses, prejudice, careless unloving judgments; that life is but a dream; a warm up for what is to come. We are in spring training, completing our warm up pitches, preparing ourselves for the life that counts. This life is a dress rehearsal for a better life yet to be.

Grandpa Wenger became my spiritual mentor. I have tried to copy what I saw, watching Grandpa Wenger living his life as a bi-vocational minister. When I am feeling lost and alone and wondering how to be a good grandpa I look heavenward. Grandpa help, and I find myself copying Grandpa copying Christ’s behavior. In Greg Yoder’s testimony he spoke about a colleague at work observing Greg’s

behavior, describing it as not of this world, but a life that embodied the heavenly nature of Christ. You might be the only Bible someone gets to read!

Grandpa was sure that in the last day when all gets said and done, or as Lowell Moyer liked to say, “when Brethren meet, you can be sure that more always gets said, then ever gets done.” When our last day arrives, we will be meet face to face with a God of love and abundant grace. That doesn’t mean that we escape the wrath of God and avoid God’s judgement. We can thank God, that the one who judges, is the lamb who was slain for the sins of the world, which includes mine and yours. Our judge is Jesus, who stood in our stead and bore the wrath that we deserve, so that our inheritance is one of everlasting life interacting and communing with both Jesus and the great cloud of witnesses. This earthly life is but a dream, a foretaste of the life that is to come; eternal living in a sin free environment!

One day, Grandpa died, when delivering his memorial message, my text was Hebrews 11 & 12, the great cloud of witnesses. I began by reading Jeffrey Kluger’s quote from The View, of the September 17<sup>th</sup> Time magazine leaving out his findings. I didn’t want it to be a spoiler alert, so I intentionally didn’t read the last sentence. So, listen to his findings!

“If life wanted to mess with you, it couldn’t have come up with a better way than death. Especially the lead-up. Your strength flags; your world narrows; much of what once gave you pleasure, and satisfaction is now gone. **But as it turns out, happiness is still very much with you-often even more than before.**”