

Helpful Spirit

John 14:15-21

May 21, 2017

If you knew you were dying, I mean really knew you were dying, how would you live? What kinds of things would be important to you? If Tim McGraw's 2004 hit song *Live Like You Were Dying* is autobiographical in the slightest, he would go skydiving, he would go rocky mountain climbing. He would ride a bull named Fumanchu for a few seconds. He would love deeper, speak sweeter and give forgiveness he had been denying. What about you? What kinds of things would become most important to you?

If you are anything like me, then you have not spent much time thinking about any of this. For some reason it just doesn't feel right to take time thinking about not being around. Even thinking about it now makes me sad and heavy hearted. I am not even a big fan of saying the goodbyes that are only temporary in nature. I can't really explain what it is that makes them hard, but it seems as I have gotten older and older goodbyes have become harder and harder and I'm only talking about saying goodbye to someone you are certain you will see again soon.

At times I find myself wondering, if those kind of goodbyes are hard, what would I be like if I was saying goodbye to someone, or if they were saying goodbye to me, when we knew we might not see each other again. You all think I am weepy in the pulpit, I suspect we could swim in the pool of my tears shed in that type of situation. I believe it goes without saying that the goodbyes associated with death are altogether different.

Is the pain any less if you are able to plan for the death? Are you able to say a better goodbye if you get to do so over a period of time? Questions like these cause me to think about the countless stories I've read about the way people who know they are dying say goodbye to their loved ones. Like Dr. Randy Pausch, who was a professor at Carnegie Mellon University Professor whose "Last Lecture" YouTube video went viral and his book *The Last Lecture* was a best seller. Once when asked about the widespread impact of this best-selling book, Dr. Pausch said "I know the book is doing really well, but the only 3 copies that mean anything to me are the 3 that went to my children." On another occasion, he said he agreed to the video recording of his Last Lecture so that his children would have a video memory of him. Powerful

In May of 2008 Hines Ward was still playing football for my beloved Pittsburgh Steelers and arrived at a summer Minicamp with two (2) books; the team playbook and Pausch's *The Last Lecture*. Like a lot of people who watched Dr. Pausch's Last Lecture and read the book, Ward's outlook on life had changed. Dr. Pausch had become an inspiration to him and the two become friends. Something Ward said in an interview speaks volumes about the impact on his

life. He said, “It’s kind of difficult talking to a man you know is going to die, but with Randy, he’s always so positive, he never seems to get down. He has a truly amazing spirit. Here’s a man who knows his time on earth is short, and yet he has written a book that has given me and so many others a greater appreciation for life. It takes a courageous human being to do something like that.”¹

For a lot of us, we can think of family members whose lives left a lasting and profound impact on our lives. This is the reason we say things like, “I am who I am today because of _____.” In fact, I believe most of us immediately think about family members first when thinking about those of have had the most impact on our lives. This is fairly common and for the most part pretty natural. After all we are shaped and formed by both the context in which we were raised and by those who raised us.

Then there are those whose reach expands beyond their family. Something about them, or maybe their story, leaves that lasting imprint and helps shape and form us too. Like Dr. Pausch did with Hines Ward. Or even like the story I shared last week about the impact my Grandfather had on the life of Mr. Keith Cokely. The list could go on and on and on.

Upon their death though, we find ourselves wondering how to proceed. There is a fear that can easily overwhelm us when we lose someone so important to our lives. **This Gospel passage speaks to that fear we feel when we lose a loved one who played an important role in our lives. Those of us who have had such an experience know that we can become shaken and concerned about the future. It is easy to think, “How should I proceed when a strong personality in my family passes on?”**

How can we live up to the example of our mothers, fathers and mentors? Who can replace them? Do you think the Disciples were asking themselves similar type questions like “How can we keep The Commandments, our faith, and continue our struggle without the guidance of Jesus?”

But then, as though he could hear the questions that were not being asked, Jesus assures the Disciples that even after he is gone he will still be around. In fact, he’s promised that it will be easier, not harder, in this new mode. His people will be able to do things they couldn’t do when he was physically present. He has promised to send his own spirit, his own breath to be with them then and us now. Here, and for the next two chapters, he uses a special word to describe the spirit. In verse 16 he says that the father will give us ‘another advocate’. This advocate is the spirit.

Now Advocate is 1 way to translate the Greek word Paraclete, but there are others like helper and comforter. I believe all of these words provide a deep and meaningful way to describe the spirit Jesus is telling them about. This spirit is all of these things and more. The Spirit walks

¹ New York Times Article, May 2008

alongside you. The spirit advocates for you. The spirit helps you. The spirit comforts you in the way others do for those who are deeply distressed following some tragedy, some loss. They hug them and stand alongside them. It gives them strength for the next moment, then the one after that, then the one after that, even though nothing has really changed on the outside. The tragedy is still a tragedy, but other human support changes our ability to cope. It gives us strength.

The spirit comes to give God's people the strength and energy to do what they have to do, to live for God and witness to God's love in the world.

It is in this farewell address by Jesus that he teaches one of the most amazing lessons of all, physical death does not contain me. Physical death never contained God and physical death will not contain you either. It's in that setting that Jesus makes the first of several remarkable promises about prayer. 'Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it.' The all-important phrase 'in my name' doesn't, of course, just mean adding 'in the name of Jesus' to anything we might think of, however stupid, selfish or hurtful. The 'name', after all, as in many cultures, is supposed to reveal the character.

Praying 'in Jesus' name', then, means that, as we get to know who Jesus is, so we find ourselves drawn into his life and love and sense of purpose. We will then begin to see what needs doing, what we should be aiming at within our sphere of possibilities, and what resources we need to do it. When we then ask, it will be 'in Jesus' name', and to his glory; and, through that, to the glory of God.

The last three verses of this section present a wonderful circle of promises that are ours because of Jesus' being with us by the spirit. We will see him. We will live with his new life. We will know that he and God are 'in' each other, and that we are 'in' him and he 'in' us. And we will be joined to Jesus and to God by an unbreakable bond of love. This, in turn, leads back where the sequence began. He will show himself to us. It is here that all the main themes of the gospel so far are now revealed for what they are: truths about the inner life of God and God's beloved children. Truths which turn to fire and love and invite us to warm ourselves and those we come into contact with.²

I wonder if recognizing the love of Jesus in others, recognizing divinity in others, gets to the very heart of the lesson Jesus was teaching the disciples in today's scripture. I wonder if the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel lays claim on what our discipleship looks like. That the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives affects how we are present in the lives of others.

If only we'd been there when Jesus was around!' people often say. He would lead us and show us which way to go. If only our mentor was around we could ask and know what to do.

² N.T. Wright, *NT For Everyone, John 14:12-21*

Teaching the Disciples that no matter what he would always be around, teaching them that physical death is not the end is as important today as it was then. It was one way Jesus lived as though he was dying and because of the way he lived he is always around and that my brothers and sisters is GOOD NEWS!