

3 May 2015

Sister Death: Dying Well

Philippians 1:18b-26

Philippians 1:18b-26. *Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.*

We stood around Jim's bed at Aspirus hospital while he laughed and joked, but in the midst of his banter managed to speak to everyone there: his wife, his son, his granddaughter, Pastor Karen Ebert, and me. He told us all thank you for all the ways we had given him joy. There was a stillness in the room, and maybe a few tears, but no weeping. No one talked about heaven; it wasn't felt to be necessary. Then one of us prayed – I don't even remember whether it was Karen or me; I just remember holding hands – and Jim nodded to the nurse.

I should explain. Jim Surprise had been dying as long as I had known him, which was about six years. Not actively or measurably, but certainly. I don't even remember how it all started, but by the time I got to know him he had had several major surgeries and toward the end had been in the hospital about once a month, for some emergency procedure or another. In the last months he'd been able to breathe only by means of a trach, and able to talk only by placing his finger on the end of the trach while he spoke. But he still smiled and laughed with every visitor. I never heard him sound sorry for himself – only for all the people who took care of him. For a while, Jim Mathwick had been the one who took homebound Communion out to him, and as Jim Mathwick slowly died of leukemia, he found strength in Jim Surprise's courage. So did Karen Ebert, who that day in the hospital room carried her own terminal cancer. Others who were facing death found strength in facing it with Jim.

Jim had come to the point that he was kept alive only by means of the machines that were connected to him, and he had decided he did not choose that existence. So he nodded to the nurse. She said, "Are you ready?" Jim smiled again and said, "I'm ready."

That's what Paul was saying to the Philippians, writing from his prison cell in Rome: "I'm read." Paul's situation was a little different, though. Death was near to him, but not inevitable. For all he knew he might be executed the next day – or set free. Like Jim, though, Paul got to choose how he was going to face death. He chose to rejoice in God. *Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.* And then he explains, in a remarkable passage of scripture. Showing not the least trace of fear, Paul ponders which he would prefer, life or death, and he isn't certain. They are different, to be sure. If he is set free, that means he gets to continue proclaiming the gospel of Christ and encouraging others in faith – hard work, but joyful. And if he's executed, that just means that the separation between him and his Lord is removed, and he can experience the same joy but more directly. As Paul puts it, *For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.* Either option, for Paul, means being with Christ. In the end, interestingly, Paul decides he'd rather not die yet – *not* because of any doubts or fears about death, but because he thinks he can still be useful to others in this life. It wasn't about him; it was about others. Jim died a few days after his farewells. We don't know about Paul, whether he died then or later. All we know is that both men, in the strength of their faith and their certainty of the love of Christ, died well. They died with dignity and confidence.

But it doesn't always happen that way. Not even to us Christians who proclaim our belief in life after death. I have also sat beside the dying beds of church members who faced death with crippling terror, who clung to life in desperation, demanded every medical intervention that anyone could imagine. I remember the man who stared at me, eyes glazed with fear even more than pain, and begged me to reassure him that he would be all right. I tried, but confidence is one thing you can't acquire second-hand. My words bounced off his fear like pebbles on a windshield.

And that man was a Christian, you ask? Yes, he was. A frightened Christian. Not the only one, either. This past January, I took a few days and drove down to Kansas City, where one of my best friends from childhood is dying of lung cancer. After a year of chemo, which worked for a little while but no longer, Mark had discontinued treatment and enrolled in hospice. Actually, that's helped, and he's had four good months now, but he is dying. As we talked that day, Mark told me something that astonished me. He had been talking to his hospice nurse about exactly this issue, dying well, and Mark had asked her if she had had patients who had died badly. She told him, "Oh, yes. And a surprising number of the ones who died the worst are pastors."

I stared at Mark. "You're kidding! But why . . . ?"

Mark said, "Yeah, I've been thinking about that. I think it's because they've spent their whole lives telling people that in order to get to heaven they had to believe exactly the right things, be a member of the right church, do all the right stuff. Now that they're facing death themselves, they're wondering, 'What if I *don't* have it all right?'" I sat there thinking about this, and Mark added, "You see, if your faith was always based on fear, then when you face death, that's all you know how to do."

Mark himself was raised in a devout Christian family – his parents were missionaries in Singapore with mine. But, as an adult, Mark left the church, partly because he just couldn't stomach the atmosphere of fear that surrounded his childhood faith. Until he visited this church about a year ago to hear me preach, he hadn't been in a church for twenty years. But he's facing death calmly. He says, "Maybe at the end I'll be as frightened as anyone, but for now I'm not really afraid of death. I believe there's something else waiting there. And I'm . . . curious."

Dying well. As far as I can see, there is no necessary correlation between believing in heaven and dying with confidence. But there *is* a definite and unbreakable connection between *living* well and dying well. If in your life you have learned to trust others, then as you die it is possible to trust God. If in your life you have lived with integrity – being honest with others and with yourself – then as you die you are able to accept without question Christ's promise that he will never leave us or forsake us. If in your life you have learned to forgive others, then as you approach your own death you are able to believe that you are forgiven. And if in your life you have learned to love, then you can die in the certainty that you are loved yourself. And if you die in that trust and integrity and forgiveness and love, then the specifics of the afterlife are all but irrelevant, because you know dying or living, you are with Christ.

Our last great witness on earth, very often, is the way we die. Paul, in prison in Rome, was able to face death well not because he believed in heaven but because he trusted Christ. That's the key. It is not about having the right doctrines or memberships; it is about having a deep relationship with a living God. That's what made the difference for Paul. And for Jim Surprise. And for Jim Mathwick. And for Karen Ebert, all of whom died with peace and confidence, secure in the certainty that they were in good hands, loving and loved. For each of them, living was Christ. So dying could only be gain.