

***One Eye on Death***  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Psalm 90:12:

“Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

John 10:10:

“I (Jesus) have come that (my followers) might have life and have it abundantly.”

Pastor Bill Chadwick July 16, 2017

Woody Allen was once asked if he would like to achieve immortality through his work. His reply, “No, I want to achieve immortality by *not dying*.” That option is not open to us.

As many of you know, nine days ago was my brother-in-law’s memorial service. He died in a tragic car crash May 2<sup>nd</sup> that killed three people. Bob was 64.

One year ago today my niece Carina’s stepson died at age 23.

I don’t mean to depress you, but to get your attention. As the preacher from Ecclesiastes counseled some 2500 years ago, “The wise person thinks about death.” And in the words of the psalmist, “Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

Pondering death is helpful in four areas.

My best friend from my first year of seminary, Rick Johnston, invited me to go with him to Alaska for the entire following summer for an adventure of hiking, camping, fishing. How cool would that be!? I reluctantly declined, needing to earn some money. So that summer I was living at home with my folks, working at my old job, when one day late in July I received a letter informing me that Rick had been killed in an accident with his jeep in Alaska.

That night, for the first time in 10 years, I told my parents that I loved them. I doubt that more than a month went by the rest of their lives, without me telling them that I loved them. There is that well-known saying by Bishop Stephen Grellet, the essence

of which is, "If there is any kind word that I might say, or good thing that I might do, let me do it now, for I pass this way but once."

In that spirit, let me tell you what a holy privilege and personal blessing it is to share ministry and life and laughter with you, dear friends. I love you.

Second. Pondering death keeps the daily irritations of life in perspective. Remember that best-selling book, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff: P.S. It's All Small Stuff*. Well, certainly it's not *all* small stuff, but most of it is. For example, cancer is not small stuff, but it puts the rest of life in perspective. A parishioner told me that since his cancer diagnosis, "I don't get mad any more. I don't have time for it."

As a pastor I deal with death a lot, which is why I don't honk at drivers ahead of me when the light turns green. I don't spend a lot of time on my lawn or washing my car. I don't fret about teenagers' hair...or my own lack of same. I don't yell at umpires and referees...in person, sometimes on TV.

When things are bugging me I try to remind myself, "I'm not in Aleppo, Syria. I'm having a good day." Remembering our mortality keeps daily irritations in perspective.

Third. Pondering our death also puts material things in perspective. My kids are all 20-somethings and they occasionally need a helping hand financially. When I start to get bugged I think how grateful I am that I am able to float a small loan, but more important how grateful I am that, despite their various misadventures, they are all alive and costing me money.

At my brother-in-law Bob's memorial service I shared in the eulogy that one time I admired the cardigan sweater he was wearing. He took it off and gave it to me. After the memorial service the other night one of his friends came up and told me the story of being at a party with Bob. The friend's wife admired the necktie Bob was wearing. At the end of the evening when Bob was leaving he found the friend and handed him the tie. "Here, I want you to have it."

The friend protested, "I have a lot of ties." "

No no no,” said Bob. “Your wife really likes this one. Take it.” So he did.

I think a few years back I shared this story, but it’s worth repeating. It’s the story of an Indian monarch who centuries ago commissioned a famous architect to design and build for him a new palace. The architect agreed to the project, but with one unusual proviso, that the king not inspect the palace until it was entirely completed. The king agreed and gave the architect a great sum of money to fashion a new palace out at the edge of the city. From time to time the impatient monarch summoned the architect to ask how the palace was coming. “Oh,” your majesty, “it is even better than I had imagined. So beautiful. You will absolutely love it.”

“I’d like to see it,” said the king.

“I know, but remember our agreement and please be patient. I want it to be a complete surprise. And I need just a bit more money,” which the king supplied. This happened a number of times. Finally, after three years the architect reported to the king that the palace was finished. With great fanfare the monarch invited the architect to sit beside him in his royal chariot and all the royal court proceeded in a grand procession to the edge of town to see the new palace.

When they arrived they were met with throngs of cheering people. But they did not see a magnificent palace. What stretched out before them was an entire campus of large, but plain buildings. “What is the meaning of this?!” the monarch thundered! “Here is no magnificent palace! Seize this faithless architect, who has wasted my money, and throw him into prison and we will hang him at sunrise.”

“Your majesty,” cried the architect. “Please allow me to explain. You knew I was a Christian when you commissioned me. What you see before you here is a hospital for poor people, a school for impoverished children, which includes three meals a day, and a vocational school for adults, that poor people might stop begging and learn a trade to support themselves. My Lord Jesus commanded, ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...’ Your majesty, I have built for you a magnificent palace in heaven, beyond anything anyone could construct on earth.”

And the crowds cheered and praised the king with a deafening roar of gratitude. The king released the architect and asked how he, too, could become a follower of this Jesus.

This story leads us to our fourth area. Pondering our death helps us to put our energies into things of eternal value.

Jesus clearly was a person with one eye on his own death. His public ministry was short, perhaps two or three years when he was just in his late thirties. And for at least the last year of his life, he was well aware of the direction his ministry was taking him. Continued faithfulness to God was going to lead him into more and more confrontations with the Jewish and Roman authorities and eventually that was certain to lead to a cross.

How did he respond? He kept on keepin' on—teaching the ways of God, going off alone to pray, attending parties, bouncing babies on his knee, healing the sick (even on the Sabbath), proclaiming a ministry of welcome—even to sinners, to women, to gentiles. Demanding justice for the powerless and oppressed. A ministry of compassion and commitment and inclusion.

Now, you and I are not Jesus, but we are commissioned to that same ministry of reconciliation and compassion that he began. With every infant baptism we make some pretty hefty promises about building a better world for these children. Pondering our own death helps us to keep our focus on things of eternal value.

At a retreat I led for retired folks a few years back I asked them to think back on what they were most proud of in their lives, what gave them the most lasting satisfaction. Out of the 17 people how many do you think mentioned their jobs? One. Now I hope that our vocation is important to us, mine certainly is to me, but what these folks in the autumn of their lives reflected on had to do not with job accomplishments, but with relationships.

What legacy will our faithfulness to God leave to this world?

Let us pray. O God, teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom: that we may seize opportunities to spread joy, that we may keep the daily irritations of life in perspective, that we may keep material possessions in their proper place, and that we may leave a legacy of love and compassion and thereby store up treasures in heaven.

Amen? Amen!