

Message for Waterford Mennonite Church
October 28, 2013

Living with the end in mind: Embracing your mortality

Genesis 49: 28-33; Hebrews 11: 21-22

Some time ago, I was visiting a hospice patient who was in her late nineties. Annie was in a health care facility and was declining physically. Annie was a very difficult patient, constantly complaining about her care and about her pain.

When I first visited Annie, I noticed old pictures and art work from Africa all over her walls. I learned Annie and her first husband, who was a medical doctor, had gone as missionaries to Africa in the 1930's. She had two children born there. In fact, she had written a book about their time in Africa which I checked out of the Goshen Public Library and read.

I learned Annie's husband was on a trip on horseback out into a remote area when he drowned crossing a river. She was left in a foreign country with two young children. After taking the long boat ride home, she completed her nursing degree and supported and raised her children. She remarried, but her second husband became ill and died after about 10 years of marriage.

When she retired from nursing, again a widow, Annie went back overseas to provide public health nursing care in a remote, rural village for a number of years.

Now Annie was terminally ill, the doctors said, but Annie was not very happy. She did not understand why she was still alive. She did affirm to me that she knew God was with her. One day, I asked Annie if she talked with God. She said, "Of course!" I asked her, "What does God say to you?" Her immediate response was a gruff, "He tells me to mind my own business!"

My question to her was, "And what do you think your business is?" She was quiet for a bit and then said in a more subdued voice, "I don't know."

As I reflected on our visit, completed reading her book and asked God for wisdom in ministering to Annie, I knew what to do. On my next visit with Annie, her son

was there from out of town. He was confronting his mother about why she was so mean to people, even her own children and grandchildren.

Annie was quiet. I said, "Annie, do you remember when you said God told you to mind your own business? I think I know what your business is. You never had the opportunity to grieve the tragic loss of your first husband who left you in a foreign country with two young children." Annie looked at me with tears in her eyes. We prayed together; I asked God to grant Annie wisdom to grieve the loss of her husband who had left her alone with her children so many years ago.

Annie needed to take time, even in her 90's, to grieve the tragic losses in her life. Annie eventually got well enough to leave Hospice care.

Annie died peacefully a year later at the age of 99.

Scripture context:

When we look at the scripture read for us this morning, we see the story of Jacob. I would like us to look at the larger context of this story. Jacob had a big family, what we would call today a dysfunctional family. First of all, Jacob deceived his own blind father Isaac into giving him the birthright blessing which belonged to his older twin brother Esau.

Jacob eventually had two wives who didn't get along. Jacob had twelve sons, ten from his first wife Leah and two from his favorite wife, Rachel. (By the way, my favorite wife's name is Rachel too).

You remember the story... the older ten sons were the ones who sold their young brother Joseph to slave traders going to Egypt; then faked his death, soaked his coat of many colors in blood; and told a lie to their father Jacob.

After years of imprisonment in Egypt on false charges, Joseph ends up second in command to Pharaoh during a global famine. In this role as chief operating officer of Pharaoh's international food and grain service, Joseph was able to save the lives of all his brothers and sisters as well as his father. Joseph moved the entire family, including father Jacob, to Egypt to live close to him.

Our scripture this morning takes place in Egypt at the end of Jacob's life. After all the family intrigue, deception and conflict; after moving with his whole family to a foreign country to be with his favorite son; Jacob realizes he is nearing the end of his life.

He gathers all his children and grandchildren together. Jacob blesses each son, gives them instructions about what to do with his body after he dies; pulls his feet into bed and dies. And our scripture says, "He was gathered to his people."

Of course the story doesn't end there. This family had lost their father, the one who had kept them together in spite of all the ill will and treachery that had occurred. The patriarch of their tribe was gone. They needed a lot of reconciliation as brothers. They had a lot of complicated grieving to do.

For burial and memorial services, they followed the traditions of their family as well as the customs of the culture of Egypt. We read about the family mourning in Genesis 50. They took time to embalm Jacob's body like a pharaoh. Forty days to embalm the body and 70 days to grieve his death. I wonder if they will ever find an Egyptian mummy buried in Israel somewhere?

Part of the grief in Jacob's family happened after they buried his body back in the land of Canaan as he requested. You will find this part of the story in Genesis 50: 15-21. These brothers who had sold Joseph into Egypt many years before realized now that their father was gone Joseph could carry out any grudge he was holding against them.

The family had to be reconciled. These brothers needed reassurance that Joseph had forgiven them. If he would not forgive them, they were ready to become his slaves!

This story of Jacob and Joseph is a key story in Jewish tradition. It is also a key story in the early Christian tradition. We see this in the NT book of Hebrews. Let's look at Hebrews 11: 21, 22. READ

Jacob's blessing his sons and giving instructions to bury him back home in the promise land was a matter of faith in the I AM, the God this family had followed ever since his grandparents Abraham and Sarah had left home and wandered to

this promised land. By faith both Jacob and Joseph knew this family would not be staying in this foreign land of Egypt. By faith, we also know that Joseph forgave his brothers fully and completely. They lived with the end in mind by faith.

One of the things I learned while living in Africa and in Haiti is that grieving is short and intense in many cultures. When a loved one dies, even in rural Haiti, the family opens their home, even if home is a mud hut, for extended family and neighbors to come and sit with them to help them through their grief. This wake, or community grieving, takes at least 24 hours, sometimes days, even staying awake throughout the night. The extended family or their church provides food and drink for everyone.

Then the body is put into a rough wooden box and carried on their shoulders to be buried, with intense crying and weeping and lamenting the whole way to the cemetery. After the burial, the grieving is finished.

In cultures where many are in a survival mode, with limited food, limited emotional energy and even more limited money available, this open, intense and time-limited grieving is as healthy as they can be under the circumstances.

Some of you may be asking, “why embrace our mortality; why think about my death, about the end of this life when the ultimate goal is to live?”

In their book entitled, **Living with the end in mind**, Erin and Douglas Kramp say, “We have come to believe that by embracing your mortality—whether you are in perfect health or are ill—you can live a more purposeful, peaceful, and joyful life.”

Erin and Douglas wrote this book after Erin suffered a major bout with disease in which she ended up secluded in an isolation room for three weeks, barely conscious. Listen to what Erin was able to share about that time after she recovered.

“While my body was fighting for its life, my spirit was in another place. In the tranquility of that room, I began a spiritual journey. In that meditative state, my mind stopped chattering, and I heard what God had to say to me. I remember saying I felt unworthy of God’s attention. Who was I to have a conversation with God? With God’s answers, I came to see my feelings of

inadequacy came from me, not from God. God was standing there with open arms all the time... God taught me that each of us is a unique prism through which God's love is reflected to those around us. It didn't matter what I did in my life, whether I swept floors, became a surgeon, created companies, or gave all my money to charity. What mattered was how I allowed God's love to flow through me as I lived every day." P.149

When we live with the end in mind, when we are willing to embrace our mortality, it is not morbid or sad or depressing. In fact, it can be life giving.

Stephen Jenkinson, a teacher, author and founder of Orphan Wisdom School has written about a different perspective of grief. And I quote:

"Though now addicted to security, comfort and managing uncertainty, our culture could learn to honor, teach and live grief as a skill; a skill as vital to our personal, community and spiritual life as the skill of loving. How we die and how we care for those who are dying among us either makes communities or breaks them."

Jenkinson goes on to say,

"A good death is everyone's right, but the idea makes no sense in a culture that doesn't believe in dying at all: this is the dilemma for those working in our health care system where dying is the end, not the fulfillment of health." End of quote.

This reminds me of Don, a 70 year old widower I ministered to in a neighboring town. Don was a successful businessman and had a lot of friends in town. Don had two adult daughters who fully supported their father's decisions about the end of his life. Don was a private man, so although many of his friends knew he was sick, they did not know Don was terminally ill.

On his 70th birthday, Don and his daughters planned a big birthday party at a local restaurant and invited over 300 of his friends and former associates. Don paid the entire bill including a full dinner and a DJ for those who wanted to dance.

At the end of the party, sitting in his wheel chair with oxygen to help him breathe, Don shared that he had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and this was his opportunity to tell all his friends good-bye. Don was preparing spiritually to join his wife and the rest of his family who were already gone; the hereafter was a mystery to Don but something he believed without a doubt.

Don died several months later at home with his daughters at his side. No fuss, no going to the hospital and being hooked up to tubes and machines, no heroic efforts, just quiet, confident and intentional planning for the end, as Don put it “just like I managed my business”.

So what can we learn this morning from these stories?

1. Taking **time** to grieve, allows us to deal honestly with family differences, to cry together, to laugh together and to find healing and wholeness as we remember.

As we learned from the story of Annie, not taking time to grieve can be hazardous to your health and well-being! As we learn from all these stories, every person’s end of life journey is different and we cannot always choose exactly what that will be like. But we can be intentional about what we prefer our end to be like; we can anticipate our losses and grieve those losses openly and honestly as much as possible.

2. Forgiving those who have wronged us is a key to being able to grieve our losses in a healthy way.

Jesus made forgiveness a central message in his life and ministry for a reason. Forgiving someone else is not always easy. Sometimes we want to hold on to that unforgiving spirit. It justifies our feelings, it fuels our anger.

On the other hand, forgiving those who have hurt us, allows us to let go of that pain; it allows us to grieve the loss of a relationship; it allows us release to God whatever happened in the past as well as what will happen in the future.

As a community of faith, as healthy members of the body of Christ, we are called to embrace our grief and our mortality... together... at any age; not just when we think we are getting old...and not by ourselves, alone.

Yes, we can stuff the feelings and not deal with them. Some people experience loss after loss and don't have the opportunity to grieve when another loss comes along. Eventually that accumulating grief will come out in some way, either physically, or emotionally. And it can be painful.

3. Dealing with, naming our issues: family relationships, unresolved things from our past, grudges, anger can open up our ability to grieve, to feel a loss, to be free of those things which bind us.

As Velma said in her message last Sunday, grieving is hard work. Sometimes it is complicated. I won't take time to tell you stories this morning of those I have ministered to in Hospice who didn't want to face their mortality; they didn't want to deal with their anger, they didn't want to forgive someone. Those stories are too sad.

But from the stories I have shared this morning, you see that embracing our mortality, facing our fears, grieving our losses can free us to experience the love and mercy and grace of God in new ways. Facing our mortality with honesty and integrity opens new opportunities to be that prism which reflects, which refracts God's love to those around us in beautiful rainbow colors.

So this morning as you reflect on the stories, I challenge you to remember three simple points concerning grief.

1. Take time to grieve.
2. Forgive those who have wronged you.
3. Deal with your issues, whatever they are.

In closing, I want to read Hebrews 12:1-2.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith..."

And may it be so!