

Speaking of Death (John 12.20-33)
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church
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I remember the first time I spoke with the woman. I can picture her hospital room with its drab colors and utilitarian furniture. No one else was there the first time I spoke with her, just the woman who had called. She didn't know me, but she had been given a rough diagnosis and wanted to talk with someone. So she called for me, the young chaplain, to come and sit with her for awhile. I had taken those sorts of calls before, but I always felt a tinge of anxiety as I walked through the maze of hospital hallways headed for the room of a person I knew next to nothing about. All I really knew was that this woman was dying. She knew it, too, and she wanted to talk.

When I reached her door, I knocked and waited for a reply. I thought I heard something like a "Come in," but wasn't sure so I cracked the door and knocked lightly once again. "Yes," said a raspy voice, "Come in." I stepped inside and introduced myself, taking note of the surroundings. On the far side of the room, next to a window, lay an empty bed, its sheets neatly folded and tucked. And on the near side of the room sat the woman I had come to see. Her bed was rather neatly made as well, and she was sitting next to it in a chair, looking as if she didn't really belong. In fact, it was only the hospital i.d. bracelet she wore that gave her away as a patient. She looked otherwise healthy and almost happy, but as she invited me to take a seat we both knew that wasn't the case. I pulled up a chair. The woman looked to be in her early fifties maybe. She had rather straight shoulder-length brown hair and a nervous smile. Our conversation began in a way that many of my hospital conversations began. She mentioned something to me about not being particularly religious, but...

To be honest, whenever someone mentioned to me that they weren't particularly religious, I started to like them right away. For with that simple disclaimer, "I'm not particularly religious, chaplain," we could almost start from scratch, wipe the slate clean of any expected claims of dogma and doctrine and just begin to talk about whatever it was that we wanted or needed to talk about. So after the woman made her not so religious disclaimer, I did what always made sense to me. I looked into her eyes, said "Okay," and asked some really open-ended question like, "What's on your mind?" I sometimes wished I could have been more direct than that, sometimes wanted to skip past the pleasantries, say that we both knew she was dying, but words like those couldn't really be rushed or forced. So I simply sat down and began to listen to the woman as she spoke. She told me a little about her background, about her family, and about how she had been coming to the hospital for tests. It was something of a thumbnail sketch of her life, information that she needed to give me so that I would know who I was talking to. Her story pulled me in, in part because it was a good story, but more importantly because it was enriched by what we both knew but had not yet named – this woman was running out of days...her story was coming to an end.

I opened the lectionary text this week and remembered that woman for a couple of reasons, not the least of which was that the reading tells us of a Jesus who is discussing the end of his own life. The Book of John isn't set in a hospital room or anything, but in my mind it might as well be. Because the questions it raises are the same ones that almost always came up if I sat with someone in the hospital long enough. They are the bittersweet existential questions about the meaning of life and our struggle to be hopeful.

And this morning, as we listen to the words of the rabbi for a moment, I'd like to suggest that we do it as my friend might have, as those who are not particularly religious, sweeping aside dogmatic and doctrinal claims if that is possible and listening simply to the man Jesus as he speaks quite plainly about death. This may be a difficult thing to do because so much of our religious tradition has been used to try and soften death by offering us words of milquetoast comfort or to avoid and deny death by constructing theologies that tell us there is another world where none of us will ever have to die. But that kind of talk has never been particularly helpful to me because I don't live in another world where none of us will ever have to die. I live in a world where people die all the time. In fact, just within the small community of this church I know of five families in recent weeks who have suffered the death of someone they love – we have suffered the death of an aunt, a daughter, a brother, a mother, and a son. And this Lent, I'm not looking for comfort so much as I'm looking for courage, not seeking to be particularly religious so much as generally honest, not listening for a Jesus who will take away our mortality but simply speak to it. Strangely enough, in John Chapter 12, I think he does.

As the old gospel writer tells it, near the very end of his life, Jesus engaged in a final public conversation. Jesus and some of the disciples were at a festival and there were some there who wished to hear the rabbi teach. They came to Philip and asked after Jesus, who then began to speak to them in a very dramatic way. "The hour has come for me," (v. 23) Jesus said, and then he offered some paradoxical sayings about how a grain of wheat needed to die to bear fruit and all of us needed to let go of our lives in order to really hold onto them. For a few verses it sounds like classic Jesus stuff, you know, the rabbinic wisdom with the beautifully impossible ring, but then Jesus says something that

throws me right back into the hospital room. He says something that I must have heard hundreds of people say in their own ways. He says something that I think we all of us say if we ever pause even for a moment to consider our own dying. Jesus says “[But] Now my soul is troubled.” (v. 27) “Now my soul is troubled.” He follows with a rather stark assessment that God will not save him from his dying and, if you follow John’s account, a few thickly interpretive sentences at the end. But at the risk of sounding not particularly religious, I’d rather focus our attention on Jesus’ humanity and his mortality, rather than the dogma and doctrine of the old writer of John. Because there’s much more at stake here, I think. There’s the very founder of our religious tradition, himself still a young man, sensing his own death and walking toward it, saying as he does that he is deeply troubled.

There is an invitation in this story, but it’s not an invitation that all of the particularly religious are inclined to accept. That invitation is to seriously contemplate our mortality just as the rabbi himself did and to examine what sorts of lives we will lead knowing that the days are not really promised to us. As I read the story these days, Jesus is not offering any sort of easy road at all. He claims no escape from death or even from the fear of it with his admission that he is worried, that his soul is deeply troubled. As I read the story these days, Jesus instead begins to embody a sort of existential courage by practicing a measure of love, justice, and peace, even as he trudges toward what he knows will be the end of his life. His story invites others to summon their courage not by telling them that everything will turn out fine, but by impressing upon them that the time is short and we must each decide the course of our own lives. In the rabbi’s case, he

continued to call people beyond the confines of their dogma and doctrine to take the real risks, the much more important risks, of loving and being alive.

I came to befriend the woman after several months of regular visits in the hospital. After our first visit she asked if I'd come back, and it sounded like the easiest request a dying person ever made. "Will you come back and sit with me again?" Two days later I knocked on the door and began a process that I never made any attempt to stop, the process of the two of us becoming friends. I knew at the time that it was a risky business to make friends with someone who wasn't going to be able to stick around, a fact that became more and more apparent as the woman grew weaker with her treatments. Like many patients, she lost weight and hair and began to visibly diminish as the days passed. She longed to be at home, but for various reasons was forced to keep returning to the hospital where she was finally assigned a hospice nurse for comfort care. Throughout that time, I was able to knock on her door about three times a week, usually in the mornings, which were good for her, and we would simply sit together and talk.

After our first few visits, she more or less cut to the chase and began to talk about her chances of making it, which she reckoned were worsening. She told me about her treatments and how they made her feel physically. She told me about the emotional drain of her illness and how difficult it was some days to keep her spirits up. And she told me that somehow, in spite of it all, or maybe because of it all, life seemed intensely sweet and beautiful to her. All I could do was agree with my friend, who was becoming more and more dear to me even as we both knew the days were drawing to a close.

Near the end of her life my friend began to ask me a lot of religious questions. She reflected on all manner of topics from suffering to love to forgiveness and we talked about what each of those ideas meant to us. I was surprised at her level of energy and enthusiasm for our discussions, but every time I saw her she had some new topic awaiting our reflection. Among those conversations, there was one that I don't think I'll ever forget. It was one of our very last. By this time she had been moved to a quiet room at the end of a hallway where she could be left more or less in peace. She still felt pretty good in the mornings, and it is a morning that I remember. I knocked, as always, waited for the now familiar voice, and went in to see my friend. She seemed glad that I'd come. I took a seat in a chair near her bed, set down my cup of coffee, and asked what was on her mind. In my memory she had a very serious countenance and she looked into my eyes and skipped right past the morning small talk. She said something like, "Jeremy, I know that I'm not going to live much longer and I've been wondering about something." My friend looked really worried. I leaned in to listen. "Yes?" I inquired. She continued. "I'm worried about what will happen to me when I die. Is there...is there a heaven?" And there it was. The question of a not particularly religious woman at the end of her life. "Is there a heaven?" I repeated. And I'm sure that she asked again while I sat next to her and fretted for a moment about what I was going to say.

The room fell silent while my eyes moved from my friend to my coffee cup and then back to my friend again. It wasn't that I didn't know what I was going to say, it was that I didn't know if it was unkind to say it, I wasn't sure how she might respond. But we were friends and she was dying and there was never anything else to do but speak honestly. So I took a sip of my coffee and mustered my reply. "I don't know," I said.

“You don’t know if there’s a heaven?” she gasped. “No, I really don’t know what happens when we die,” I offered. I felt terrible for saying it because I thought she was looking for some comfort, but I knew that all I could do was tell the truth and the truth was that what happens when we die is a mystery to me. I thought that perhaps the two of us would just sit there forever, uncomfortably, but after only the briefest silence something happened that felt to me like a sort of gift. In the midst of that awkward silence of unknowing, in the context of the real friendship that had developed between us, and in the face of a death that was drawing very near, my friend began to laugh. It wasn’t an awkward laugh. It was a real laugh. It turned into a belly laugh. An in-spite-of-it-all laugh. Maybe a because-of-it-all laugh. It was a still-alive-today-don’t-know-what-happens-tomorrow-tell-the-truth-and-not-be-afraid-anymore laugh. It was a great laugh of letting go and it was strange and free and beautiful. My friend laughed until I started laughing and she kept laughing long after I’d stopped. And only once all of the silliness and shaking of her giggles finally receded did she tell me what had been going through her mind. If I’d given her any other answer, she said, she wouldn’t have believed a word of it. Because who can say what happens when you die? Nobody can say. She dried her eyes and we then began to talk about how to live and love and even laugh in spite of all our uncertainties.

A few days after that conversation, my friend died. I had been able to visit her maybe a couple more times and I’m not sure that I remember what we talked about. What I remember most, really, is simply her courage as death came near. She had the courage to keep making friends, she had the courage to keep asking questions, she had the courage to laugh and to keep laughing. Somehow, I think, she gave me a bit of courage. For my

friend who was not particularly religious reminded me more of the rabbi than most people do. She moved toward her death without really being bound by it, she found the freedom in that place to take risks, she told the truth as she understood it, and she even invited others, like me, to join her. And I know this is not an easy thing to talk about, but somehow the story of my friend, the story of our rabbi, and the season of Lent invite us to consider this question: Whether we happen to be particularly religious or not, how will we live our lives with some existential courage, practicing love, justice, and peace with the time we have? For the days are fewer than we know. And much depends on our answer.

Amen.