

Witness to Reconciliation

Sunday, January 20, 2013

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I've been invited to speak to reconciliation and death. What I say is out of my own experience alone—there is no expectation that my experience becomes your experience. Do we ever reconcile to death? Does God expect that of us?

As we walk this earth, death and life journey together alongside us. Death the enemy—life the friend. Death the separator, cold and hard as the marble marker on the grave, the hurtful one, ugly in nature. Life the sustainer, the lover, the friend, the very presence of God himself. On rare occasions, they may switch roles. In my situation, that happened twice when I begged death to become my friend. Death and grief—cause and effect—physical and emotional in nature—inseparable.

Death is a real part of life—no escape for any of us.

I've lived long enough to see almost all of my relatives, many of my friends, a son and a husband die. In all of that I am constantly reassured by Romans 8 that nothing will separate me from the love of God.

I want to share two experiences of death in my life—one our son, who died at age twenty-two, and one my husband, who died at age eighty-two.

Paul, our son, was diagnosed with a terminal illness at age twenty. The diagnosis was a two- to five-year expectancy. He lived for two years. Amazingly, in all that time, Paul never asked the question, "Why me?" At the outset of his illness, Paul said to me, "I do not need your tears. I need your strength." Quite an assignment.

From that moment on I locked my grief inside my heart. With God's grace and an abundance of prayer I granted his request.

After the first year of his illness Paul came to Jim and me asking our permission to marry. Ruth was a young woman he had fallen in love with before his illness. Selfishly I struggled. He was *my* son—he was *dying*. I wanted to take care of him. By the grace of God, like the biblical prodigal “I came to myself.” I celebrated their marriage with true joy that April.

Paul and Ruth established a lovely home on the north side. One day in February, Paul called and invited Jim and me to come to their apartment. Paul said, “I want to come home to die.” That day I learned what true love is. That young bride, eighteen years old, was willing to give up her life, her home, for our son. They moved in with Jim and me. Ruth and I together cared for Paul for the next three months. Paul died almost a year to the date of their wedding. Ruth will probably remain the most extraordinary person I will ever know. She and her family remain a rich part of my life today.

God was with me.

Jim and I reacted differently to Paul’s death. I had locked away grief for two years. Within a year I became nearly bedridden with rheumatoid arthritis. Jim, already sensitive and caring, became even more so—especially to those who had their own grief. He wrote beautiful notes, made personal visits, and walked through holy moments with some. Five years later, he wrote his inner reflections about prayer, life, death, the church, and family. In his own words, he felt that was the most important writing he ever did.

Jim’s diagnosis five years ago was for a few months of life. He lived six weeks. As he began slipping away emotionally as well as physically, I was losing my comforter, my encourager, my lover, my best friend.

Losing a son and losing a husband are two different things. It was once said to me that your children are only loaned to you. In so many ways that is true. They grow up, leave home, establish a family of their own. Jim became my partner for life. Our children were the physical expression of the love we shared for one another. I recall some words spoken at the

memorial service for David Klooster not so long ago. A son, recalling remembrances of his father, told the story of how he and his brothers would occasionally ask their father, "Which of us do you love best?" David's reply always was, "I love your mother best, and you and your brothers the same." Our son Paul once gave his father a little wooden plaque that read, "The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother." I was loved.

I said grief is physical as well as emotional. That first year after Jim died, I was physically *cold*. How does one overcome such grief and move on?

Life itself helps you to do so. To quote from Jim's reflections: "The world did not stop when my world stopped and to confess that is as helpful as it is hurtful. Work, structure, and routine can preserve sanity, do help us to hang on, and may make the unbearable bearable."

On All Saints' Day, when our church celebrates the people in our community who have died over the past two years, it is a reminder that our grief is not ours alone.

I know that God was present as I experienced the dying and death of people I loved.

What about now? How does one meet life?

The heart does heal. Ambushes of grief will flood over me from time to time to remind me that death will always rear its ugly head.

Where is that comforter, encourager, lover, friend? I think that deep sensitivity to God's presence continues to sustain me.

I have found that presence in some of the most unexpected places I could ever have imagined:

In a woman who drove a bulldozer and waved good morning to me every day. We finally met and became true friends.

In a woman unknown to me who stopped her car and asked what happened to my husband.

In a baker, a total stranger, who gave me a loaf of his freshly baked bread.

In a woman, on the verge of separating from her husband, who recognized the love Jim and I shared and was inspired to give her marriage another try.

In my children.

In my friends.

In this communion of saints at Hope Church.

God is everywhere!

Each night I can truthfully end my day by thanking God for his presence in my life.

Reconcile to death? God has already done that through the hope of the resurrection.

After someone you love dies—I have come to say the true reconciliation is not to death but to Life.

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