

From the Pastor's Desktop

A Spiritual Reflection on Death and Life



from Father Charles Puthota

November 13, 2022

Dear Parishioners of St. Elizabeth,

I DID NOT DIE

Do not stand at my grave and forever weep. I am not there; I do not sleep. I am a thousand winds that blow. I am the diamond glints on snow. I am the sunlight on ripened grain. I am the gentle autumn's rain. When you awaken in the morning's hush I am the swift uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight. I am the soft stars that shine at night. Do not stand at my grave and forever cry. I am not there. I did not die.

---Attributed to Melinda Sue Pacho

Reflection: Early November, with the Feast of All Saints and All Souls Day, we suddenly wake up from slumber, so to speak, with our minds turned toward death. Nature nudges us by gently suggesting the theme of the season. Blanketing the cold regions with a riot of color, the fall season brings incredible beauty, which will eventually make way for muted light and an ascetic look. With the leaves falling to the ground, the season will ripen into winter, when the earth will put on a bare costume, bringing darkness sooner and making daytime shorter. Nature's seasonal desire to let go and die, and later on to renew itself, dovetails into the Christian call to dwell on death and to remember the beloved dead. In November, the souls and saints come into our range of imagination, beckoning us not only to think of them in love but also to examine our own life in relation to death.

Visiting graves is a hallowed tradition in Christianity. The soft murmurs from the lips of people, "Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them," soaked in sadness and hope, have the power to pierce the heart of God. All these rituals and devotions are born of the conviction that life is only changed, not ended.

When people die, they do not cease to exist. They only change their residence; they have gone ahead to live elsewhere; they have merely changed their address. Death brings us anxiety and anguish. In the death of a dear ones, we lose ourselves---a part of us dies. Even if we are not acutely aware of it, death does inflict wounds in our souls. We feel the vital links that have kept us rooted to the world are loosened, leaving us adrift and buffeted in the storms. But the truth is the departed are not really gone. Their disappearance from our midst may be likened to the disappearance of a cargo ship sailing behind the mountains, beyond the mist and fog. The ship still exists in its original size, but it appears smaller, fading into the horizon. The ship itself is making the journey into a realm beyond our ability to see and recognize.

Emily Dickinson says famously, "Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me; the carriage held but just ourselves and immortality." Death is kind enough to stop for all of us. No one can escape from it. We are just too busy to stop for it, given our preoccupations. We consider it morbid even to think about our death. However, Christianity and other religions invite us to consider death as a friend; a gateway; a golden gate through which we enter eternal life and find release from cares and bondage. If change is good in life, death represents the ultimate change in our life. We falsely consider death outside of our lives, and yet death is embedded inside of our lives, an inseparable, inescapable part of our lives. It is the last chapter of our lives on earth.

Death foregrounds our mortality. When we mourn the dead, we come to understand the brevity of our life journey. Because life is short and death is certain, because death is a friend and the last chapter of our lives on earth, because death is the only way we can flow into the ocean of eternal life in its fullness, we will do well by keeping death in the midst of our life. Because we do not live forever in this world, because we cannot take anything with us out of this world, except our good deeds, we have to reconsider the way we live.

That is how death can help energize us toward love. That's when we will be filled with the profound desire for love, only love, always love, forever love. Love will then become the only theme, only thesis. Everything else will be a mere footnote. Our lives then will begin to be based on love, founded on love, rooted and grounded in love, directed and oriented toward love. Death is necessary for life. It's essential for love. Without the reality of death, we cannot come into the reality of life, a sentiment echoed by Angelina Jolie: "If I think more about death than some other people, it is probably because I love life more than they do."

When we challenge death, we can't escape the question, "Why did Jesus have to die?" By dying, he entered new life and has brought us eternal life. He put into practice his autobiographical parable, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit." Those of our beloved who have fallen to the ground bear fruit and have been born into everlasting life.

Action: While you keep your beloved dead in your thoughts and prayers, especially in November, grow in your love for them as they grow in theirs for you. Become aware of the truth that one day you'll join them and go home. Because you'll die, learn to live more fully now. Allow yourself to be jolted into a more loving and caring life by the truth, reality, and inevitability of death.

Your Friend and Pastor,

Father Charles Puthota