

“On Dying Well”

Introduction: As you might imagine, this last week, the week of my father’s dying, was a very different one! Not the least of which was because as he lay dying, I was not the religious professional that came into the room, spent time with the family, offered a prayer, and then left. There was a hospice and a hospital chaplain who did that. Instead, I was part of the family and staying by my dad’s bedside for multiple hours each day was now my role. As I did so, I found myself wonderfully accompanied by a spiritual writer named Henri Nouwen, and a slim volume he wrote called *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring*. It had been given to my sister by a friend just after I arrived and, spotting it on a table and glancing through it, I was quickly drawn to Nouwen’s various reflections on death and dying.

As we just heard the apostle Paul put it, “What shall we say in response to these things?” What shall we say in view of the suffering and death we will all face, whether we like it nor not, whether we’re ready for it or not? As Nouwen reflects: How might we be more ready? How can we die well? Are we preparing for it? Is it possible to give it the same attentiveness that our parents gave our birth? Can we embrace our mortality? Can we anticipate dying and death as a friend that welcomes us home and not just an unavoidable fate?

So, in these next moments I’d simply like to share some of Nouwen’s reflections, as well as my own, as we ponder this event we will all eventually face. What might be involved in dying well?

I. A Caring Community

A. In addition to remembering what my father endured over the last couple of weeks, one of the other images that sticks in my mind is the steady stream of doctors and nurses and hospice workers and friends who came into his room to care for him, as well as to care for us. While he was poked and prodded and hugged and drugged, we were prayed for, sung to, laughed with and fed. The latter one seems so simple, but sandwiches and snacks and beverages just kept showing up right when we needed them, and they were so appreciated! What a different, and much more difficult experience dying would have been, for my dad, and for us, had we just been there alone.

B. How disappointed I was when we returned to clear out dad’s room the morning after his death. I was in some way I wasn’t sure, looking to share a moment of closure and relief and sadness with all of those who had walked with us over the past days. But, the community that had put us in their arms was not around; they were all on other shifts! Their absence impressed upon me even more how significant they had become and how hard it would have been without them.

C. And by the way, what’s up with all the hugging that goes on at times like these?! Yes, there is such a thing as a ministry of touch, but as he reflects on community, Nouwen makes the related observation that we also better discover our common humanity not when we’re feeling powerful and strong, but when we’re in the process of becoming weak and vulnerable. Instead of getting caught up in the norms of society, in which we seek to discover who is the strongest and the smartest and the wealthiest and the prettiest, the process of dying makes all those pursuits meaningless. Instead of separating us from one another, dying unites us with one another. It puts us in one another’s arms. It helps assure us that we’re not alone.

II. Willingness to Become a Child (again)

A. I recall, when the girls were still in diapers, standing at the changing table and saying to them as I cleaned ‘em up and strapped on a new one, “Now pay attention to how I’m doing this cause one day you’re gonna’ do this for me!” It seemed funny at the time. 30 years later it’s getting too close for comfort! But as I watched my dad, it’s so true that the older we become, the more like a child, again, we become. We become dependent. We need someone to change us, to feed us, to wash us, and to help us get around. But if we can let this dependence lead us to consider that we are ultimately dependent upon God, it can be a great gift. It can lead us toward freedom and away from fear.

B. Earlier in the chapter, Paul writes about this when speaking of the ministry of the Spirit:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received doesn’t make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, *Abba*, Father. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. -Ro. 8:14-17

As Nouwen observes, when we rest upon God as dependent children we can walk through the gates of death with the self-confidence of heirs. We are beneficiaries of a glorious inheritance. We can rest assured that nothing but glory awaits, that God holds us safely, no matter what happens. We don’t have to fear anything or anyone. As Nouwen writes in another place (*Here and Now*), it is such confidence that leads to joy. Joy, as he describes it, is “the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death—can take that love away.” Recognizing our “second childhood,” crying *Abba*, Father, helps us to find this joy; it helps us to die well.

III. Focus on Fruitfulness

A. In his upper room discourse, as he was trying to explain to his followers what lay ahead for him on the cross, Jesus said: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (Jn. 12:24). And a bit later in the conversation: “But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come . . .” (Jn. 16:7). There was, in other words, a fruitfulness that would come to his disciples, and to the world, by and through his death.

B. Nouwen writes:

Our death may be the end of our success, our productivity, our fame, or our importance among people, but it is not the end of our fruitfulness. In fact, the opposite is true: the fruitfulness of our lives shows itself in its fullness only after we have died. . . The beauty of life is that it bears fruit long after life itself has come to an end.

C. My sister’s family and I came to recognize this as each night, the eight of us gathered around her kitchen table for dinner (and one night in a wonderful, farm to table brewery!), for conversation, for remembering, for laughter, for tears. What we were really doing, without begin totally aware of it, was celebrating the “many seeds” my father had produced, the fruit that would be an ongoing result of life, even after his death. Perhaps if we focused while living less on how we can keep accomplishing stuff,

and more on how we can live so that our life sows seeds that bear fruit when we're no longer around, we might be able to die a little more contentedly.

IV. The Hope of New Creation

A. A couple of days before I arrived, my sister tried to describe to me something that had happened to my father's ear, perhaps in a fall, no one really knew. All I can say is that it looked awful, kind of like what can happen to a wrestler or boxer. But the fascinating thing was that as the week wore on and dad's body began to give out, his ear continued to get better. By the time he died, his ear looked almost healed!

B. It was a reminder to me of the promise of new creation that the resurrection of Jesus brings about. The resurrection does not answer all of our questions as to what our future will look like, but it is the ultimate expression of God's faithfulness, the declaration that his love is everlasting, that it is stronger than death, and that through it he is in the process of making all things new, from feet to knees to hips to ears. One day, we won't need hearing aids or wheelchairs or walkers or a host of nurses and their aids. Instead, like that lame man we met a few weeks ago, we will be walking and jumping and praising God (Act. 3:8). Having confidence in that promise of what is to come, because of what Jesus experienced, can help us to die well.

C. Nouwen shares a story told him by a friend of twins talking to each other in the womb:

The sister said to her brother, "I believe there is life after birth." Her brother protested vehemently, "No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling to the cord that feeds us." The little girl insisted, "There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move." But she still could not convince her brother.

After some silence, the sister said hesitantly, "I have something else to say, and I'm afraid you won't believe that, either, but I think there is a mother." Her brother became furious. "A mother!" he shouted. "What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother, and neither have you. Who put that idea into your head? This place is all we have. Why do you always want more? We have all we need.

The sister was quite overwhelmed by her brother's response and for a while didn't dare say anything more. But she couldn't let go of her thoughts and so she said, "Don't you feel those squeezes every once in a while? They're quite unpleasant and sometimes painful." "Yes," he answered. "What's so special about that?" "Well," his sister said, "I think that these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face to face. Don't you think that's exciting?!" Her brother refused to answer.

We can live this life as if this life were all we had, as if death were scary and absurd and we had better not talk about it. Or, we can choose to claim our divine childhood, pursue life in a faith-filled community, focus on being fruitful, and trust that death is the painful but blessed passage that will bring us face-to-face with our God in his new creation.