

“The World Ahead: Life Is Eternal”
Romans 14:8

One of the gifts of my life was living in a small community in Oregon where there is a center called, “The Sacred Art of Living Center” which is an institute for spiritual formation. The center was founded by Richard and Mary Groves because of their work with Hospice. They believed that what they learned from the dying could help people learn how to live. By helping people die well, they discovered how to help people live well. This is the paradox we are looking at today. When we observe and connect with people on the edge between this life and the next, we learn about some of the deepest mysteries of life.

I felt truly blessed last January to read about the same kind of wisdom in Dr. Christopher Kerr’s book *Life is but a Dream*. Dr. Kerr works for Hospice Buffalo and has done extensive research on end-of-life experiences. His research which was medically based has shed light on deep spiritual truths. Here is a short clip about the importance of end-of-life visions and dreams: <https://youtu.be/A-buYTfjP3g>.

What Dr. Kerr and his team discovered was that people became more fully alive at the end of life because of their spiritual experiences of visions and dreams. As their bodies were declining, their spirits were soaring in their sense of peace and wholeness. This has shifted the work of the Hospice staff to help their patients explore these dreams and visions. It is powerful for me as a pastor to see this kind of shift among medical staff. It is normal for spiritual and faith people to talk about dreams and visions, but to hear a physician affirm the importance of such experiences is a powerful affirmation of the work we do in faith.

I know that I have faced death with many of you in our congregation. In fact, I have officiated at 152 memorial/funeral services since I started ministry with you at the end of 2007. In all of it, even in the worst of it, there has always been a sense of deep love and gratitude for the gift of life. In many instances, there has also been the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit through intuitive thoughts, timing of things, dreams, visions, and spiritual sharing. These experiences don’t take away our sense of pain, but they give us meaning and a doorway to the realm of God.

This past year with the pandemic, we had to face death so many times. Suddenly we could not do our usual cultural thing of pretending that death is not real, at least not for us, or that death is just something that happens to us when we are old and frail. Death became part of our daily reality and a reminder of the fragility of life. Yet, with this kind of focus came the fear of death where we see death as something to avoid and fight at all costs.

I want to invite you this week to look at the world ahead and learn from the wisdom of faith about living and dying well with the assurance of God’s eternal love for all of us. Learning to value visions and dreams before we get to the dying process can help us see life from a larger perspective. Opening ourselves to mystery and to the divine presence is the gift of getting in touch with eternity so that we are able to see life from a higher

perspective. This is the assertion which the Apostle Paul makes in his letter to the Romans in Chapter 14:8 “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

This was a reminder to the followers of Jesus in Rome to focus on what truly mattered. They had been arguing about leadership roles and religious practices. When the decree of the Emperor Claudius in 49 CE expelled the Jews from Rome (image on screen), the Gentile members of the community found themselves in the majority and as a result took charge of the leadership of the community. When their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters came back into Rome after permission was granted in 54 CE, they found a Gentile congregation that discounted the importance of their Jewish heritage. The tensions between the two groups grew to a point leading to a split in the community along racial lines. There was also the pressure of dealing with the values and religious practices of the larger community. These churches were in the heart of the Roman Empire. They were pressured to follow the ways of the Empire by supporting the domination systems of power in their day. However, Paul was reminding them of the way of Christ and the ways of the kingdom of God and how they were so different from the ways of the empire. He reminded them of their belonging to God in this life and in the life to come.

The reminder of death is a sobering one for all of us. When we get so stuck in our ways and in our human divisions and conflicts, remembering our death can help us to return to what is important. When we experience the presence of God when someone we love is dying or when we ourselves have a near-death experience, suddenly our priorities shift from focusing on power and money to love and relationships. We are also freed to know that life is eternal. When one gets even a little glimpse of eternity, nothing stays the same for them.

I would like us to share with each other about what it means for us to take the words of Paul seriously, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” Romans 14:8. What resonates with you? What do you struggle with?

I would like to share with you another little video from Dr. Kerr about the power of our visions and dreams at the time of dying: <https://youtu.be/agJ0enn4Dh8>.

Toward the end of his book, Dr. Kerr writes (Screen), “As poets and writers have reminded us throughout history, love endures. When the end draws near, time, age, and debility vanish to give way to an incredible affirmation of life. Dying is an experience that pulls us together by binding us to those who loved us from the start, those who lost along the way, and those who are returned to us in the end.”

May we learn to live each day to its fullest remembering the wisdom that comes to us from death that life is eternal, and that the world ahead is full of eternal possibilities for love. Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God. Amen.