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Death Is Change/Death Has Changed

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

I think, if I were to get in my car, I could still drive to her apartment in Hazel Crest, off the Tri-State expressway in Chicago, though I no longer remember her name. “She” was a hospice client. I sat with her every other week or so for the entire six months of my clinical education. An identical twin. Profoundly deaf. 104. At the end of her life, she had hallucinations. Now, let me tell you what, that was tricky. We didn’t speak the same language, right? She used American Sign Language, and I could only finger spell: w-h-a-t d-o you (I’ve got that sign), and then I’d give up and point at my eyes, the ceiling where she kept looking? What do you see? Spiders, bugs, monsters. For months and months, it was always something fearful. Death was slow in coming. She was afraid. I would come. I would sit at her bedside. I would try to keep up. I would “pray” a little prayer, looking up a handful of signs—peace, comfort, the Lord. As death neared, her visions turned from bugs and darkness to those she’d loved and lost. It confused her caregiver - no, I’m not your sister; no, she’s not here, she’s gone. Long gone. But the change in the visions were the first sign that she was finally ready to die. Death is change, because, in Christ, death has changed.

Back in Corinth, Paul is giving his closing arguments not just about the resurrection, but, really, of the whole letter. Both Paul and Corinthians believed they would see the return of Christ, but they have been collectively shaken by the deaths of prominent Christians. How can they live forever in Christ if they die? Ah, Paul says, *some* of us may die, but *all* of us will be changed. Death is just part of that change. It is the end of everything in us that points to death: our sinful selves, our finiteness, our perishability. Death is the end of everything in us that isn’t Christ.

In other places, Paul says that our baptisms are the beginning of this. Every day, we die to sin and rise to be with Christ. We are being changed more and more. We are becoming like the life-giver. Because what isn't life in us is dying away. Death in all its form is change, because, in Christ, death itself is changed.

Paul quote the prophets Isaiah and Hosea, "Death has been swallowed up in victory." And, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" It's a tiny dig at Roman cultic religion—remember earlier in the letter several of the Corinthians' conflicts had to do with whether or not Christians should participate in the public ceremonies of Roman civic religion. And one of the main goddesses of Rome was Victory—in Greek, she's Nike. That's the word used here, for victory—*nikon*. In Rome, victors were immortalized in art depicting the battles they won. Battles whose final movement is slaughter, rape, pillaging. Battles whose finale is death upon death upon death. Nah, Paul says, when the real last war-trumpet sounds, the victor is Christ, the one who *gives life*. In Christ, death itself is changed, and so, death, for us, is change.

Around us today is a more-or-less singular response to death: fear it, flee from it, and, if it finds you, go out swinging. Death is no victory; it is no means by which we are changed. We are told to avoid it all cost. Entire diets are formed around the avoidance of death, exercise plans, beauty routines. Admittedly, this isn't new. We have been taught to regret our choices, to approach death with shame: there is never enough time to make things right, to do all the good we've hoped to do. Death is the end. The ultimate silence. The credits role and there is no teaser or spoiler at the end. It is over.

But, as much as Paul has fought against gnosticism and that understanding of immortality, Paul also fights hard against death as the end of the hope. Death is not the end. Christ has changed death, and so death is change - it is the ultimate method by which this life is changed for what it is to come, perishability is changed for imperishability, the partial becomes the complete. It the ultimate means by which that which we now see dimly, becomes what we see face to face. How what we know only in part becomes what we know fully, even as we have always been fully known.* Our deaths at the ends of our lives can become lenses by which we understand change in our lives. Loosing our job, getting divorced, hearing bad news—all change. We need not loose hope. Change is death, but Christ has changed death, this, too, can change.

As Lutheran Christians, we are called to remember our baptisms every day, and so, every day, we die to sin and rise to new life. Every day we are changed. Every day we are changed more and more into Christ-like beings.

Over 500 years ago, Martin Luther preached a sermon on preparing to die. At the time, little pamphlets would circulate telling people the right way to die and the wrong way - the kind of way that would condemn you to hell. And it scared people. And, for Luther, it was more of the same. More condemnation and simply too little grace. More death and too little life. All law and no gospel, no Christ. So, Luther counters with...a twenty-step plan. I mean, why stop at five theses when you could post 95? I think he had some good points, but I think five might be enough.

First, it is truly right and proper to attend to those we love. To say goodbyes and to set our affairs in order. On the cross, Jesus gave his mother and his beloved disciple to one another to care for. We are wise to take the time to care for one another.

Second, seek and give forgiveness. Most of us will arrive at the end of our lives with regrets, with words spoken in haste, or things left unsaid. The trick here, of course, is not to leave the seeking and granting of forgiveness to the end, but, to make them a rule of life, a daily habit. And we are wise to include ourselves among those to whom we give mercy.

Initially, I had just four points here, but writing a sermon on death while the winds of war are swirling, reminded me of another important point. Third, work for life. Everything that is not Christ is dying in us everyday, bolster within you and in the world around you the things that point to the life-giver.

Fourth, make ample use of the means of grace. Remember your baptism every day, because it is the key to eternal life by the being the heart of every earthly transformation. Receive communion, which promises that what Christ did on the cross, the true transformation of death, was done for you and for all the saints.

Finally, embrace death. I don't mean that we seek it, but that, when we encounter death - the death of dreams, the death of loved ones, and, finally, our own deaths - we trust that Christ has gone before us, and—Alleluia—Jesus has changed death forever for our sake.

Amen.

*I am paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 13.