

1 “Gone home to be with the Lord;” “Gone to a better place;” “Promoted to glory;” “Gone to his final reward;” “Met her maker;” “Crossed the Jordan;” “Passed away;” “Departed;” “Not with us anymore;” “At rest;” “At peace;” “Shuffled off this mortal coil.” That’s just a small sample of the many and varied euphemisms we use to avoid mentioning death directly.¹ Peter Bedker, our Lay Leader, mentioned one this past week that had the entire Leadership Team laughing: “It’s better than the alternative!” You know how that one goes, right? Someone complains about their aches and pains, and then another person chimes in with the punchline: “I guess it’s better than the alternative!” We talked about making that our new church tagline: “Buffalo United Methodist Church: It’s better than the alternative!”

Why is that so funny? It’s funny because we often find humor in things that are deeply unsettling. Laughter helps us approach topics that we otherwise find it difficult to talk about. And so it’s no wonder that we use many humorous and often irreverent euphemisms to allude to death: “Assumed room temperature;” “Belly up;” “Bit the dust;” “Bought the farm;” “Cashed in her chips;” “Croaked;” “Kicked the bucket;” “Pushing up daisies;” “Six feet under;” “Taking a dirt nap;” and “Turning up his toes” and “Her number was up.” So many of the things that we fear in life are in reality things we’re unlikely to ever face, like being in an airplane crash or being bitten by a poisonous snake. Death, on the other hand, is inevitable. We laugh about death because we know that we will all certainly face death: the death of some or all of those we know and love, and barring the sudden return of Jesus before our appointed day has arrived, eventually our own death. How many of you have been to a funeral in the last year, or heard news of the death of someone you knew?

2 Whether this is good news to you or not, I’m not sure, but the Social Security Administration regularly publishes something called an Actuarial Life Table that predicts how long we’re likely to live on average. Looking at the most recent table I could find, which was for 2015, I looked at the row corresponding to my age in 2015, which was 54.² As a 54-year old male in 2015, all other things being equal, I could expect to live another 26.25 years, which has me dying at the not-so ripe old age of 80 in the year 2041. I have to admit, I

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_expressions_related_to_death

² <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/STATS/table4c6.html>

really don't see myself dying at 80, statistics be damned! I'm guessing that very few of us embrace the idea of living to only an average age, but by definition, some of us have to.

Of course, we know that life isn't always average, is it? We've all heard of people who have lived for more than 100 years, and others who've died at tender young ages. Exercise, diet, avoiding risky behaviors, and other choices we make can alter our life expectancy and quality of life, but none of them can completely eliminate accidents and disease or forestall forever the inevitable results of the aging process.

3 Death is a feature of this life, so our choice comes down to whether we're going to fear and avoid our mortality, or embrace it, making the most of each day and hoping in faith for a future that transcends the current lives we live in these bags of skin and bones that we call our bodies. We were made for more than living in fear. We were made to live with courageous, hopeful faith. So let's take another step forward today as we complete our series on living unafraid.

The Bible itself uses the euphemisms of the day to refer to death, as when Jesus first told the disciples that Lazarus had "fallen asleep." But in our next reading, Paul is unusually direct and specific in describing what we can expect in our deaths. I'm reading selected verses from 1 Corinthians, chapter 15 in the New Living translation.

{Read 1Corinthians 15, NLT}

4 I came across a metaphor for the resurrection that I'd never heard before. This one comes from Adam Hamilton's book, *Unafraid*.³ If you own a smart phone, then you know that your phone has a limited lifetime. Even if you avoid dropping it in the parking lot or the toilet, there will come a day when either the battery will fail or the hardware just won't be able to keep up any longer with software. The good news is that it's easier than ever to move all your pictures, appointments, notes, music, and- oh yeah, even your phone numbers- from your old phone to the new one. You wind up with a brand-new phone, but the contents remain the same unique contents that make it your phone.

In a way, the resurrection life will be like that. We'll leave behind these frail physical bodies and receive new, spiritual resurrection bodies. But the essence of who we are will

³ Adam Hamilton. *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*. Convergent, p. 212.

remain the same, just as Jesus remained the same, despite not being recognized in his new resurrection body. And unlike a smart phone upgrade, the resurrection upgrades we receive will be perfect and eternal, with no features held back for next year, and no software bugs or beta releases. I especially like what the Apostle Paul had to say about inheriting the Kingdom of God. We pray every week for God's Kingdom to come, but it can't fully come for us until we've put on immortal bodies. This is one upgrade that's simply not optional if we want to live forever in the blessed presence of God.

5 Sometimes it's not death itself that frightens us, but rather the journey that takes us there. On almost every measure of human performance, from reaction time to visual acuity and our ability to differentiate tastes and smells, our ability peaks somewhere in our twenties and then begins a gradual decline. Wisdom and other higher order brain functions might peak later in life, but peak they do as our biomechanical systems, including our brains, begin to show wear and tear.

Let's be honest and say that disease and some of the consequences of the aging process can at best leave us dependent on others in ways we never would have imagined when we were younger. At their worst, they can leave us with daily pain and a diminished ability to enjoy the simple things in life. Nobody wants to think of themselves as a burden on others, few of us enjoy pain, and most of us would prefer to retain as much autonomy and control over our daily lives as possible, for as long as possible.

6 But with all the indignities that can come with our aging bodies, did you know that older adults are typically happier than younger adults? Adam Hamilton shares these reasons why: Older adults often have more reasonable expectations of their lives than younger adults; They're generally more appreciative of what they have; They usually have more free time to spend with family and friends, as well as for hobbies and travel; They feel less pressure to meet the expectations of others; And their accumulated life experiences allow them to feel less overwhelmed by the trials of life.⁴

I don't want to sound like a Pollyanna here. Even at 57, I'm beginning to understand the challenges of aging in ways that are increasingly disappointing and limiting. I can only

⁴ Ibid, p. 181.

imagine what it might be like to lose a spouse, to experience dementia first-hand, or to live with a life-threatening disease or crippling chronic pain. But here's what I do know. There are people in this world of all ages who are living lives of serene contentment, despite their outward circumstances. What's their secret?

I'm quoting here from one of the saints in Adam Hamilton's book, his great aunt Celia who lived a courageous and hopeful life: "There are two things I've learned: be grateful each day, and look for ways to bless other people."⁵ That sounds like great wisdom for all of us. It sounds suspiciously similar to the directions that Jesus left us with: Love God, love one another. And do you see the beauty that's hiding at the root of both of them? They take our attention off of ourselves- our pain, our preferences, our needs, our fear- and they return our attention to God, the object of our gratitude, and the reason and power for blessing others.

7 Celia's words, and the words of Jesus, aren't just for seniors and people with pain and disease. All of us could use some help getting our attention off of ourselves and back to God and our neighbors. By the way, how did you do this week with the challenge Curtis left you with to "be a conduit, not a reservoir?" That challenge doesn't go away just because there's a new preacher and a new sermon this week! So let's build on that. What might your life look like if each morning this week, you woke up and did two things before anything else- Give thanks to God for being alive, and ask God to show you how you can be a conduit of God's love, a blessing to someone else? That assumes, of course, that you're willing to pay attention and then respond with obedience when God reveals that to you.

Are you willing to try that this week? I am! And if you do try this, let me also suggest that at the end of your day- at bedtime, or over the evening meal- you reflect again on these things and how your day went. If you have someone to share your experiences of the day with, even if it's over Facebook, then so much the better. Sharing our God experiences deepens our own appreciation of God's grace and encourages others. There's no better medicine for the fears we carry than rehearsing with gratitude the goodness of God's gifts, and then sharing that goodness with others.

⁵ Ibid, p. 184.



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