

**Find the Cost of Freedom**      **John 12:20-32** (English Standard Version)  
**Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV**    **5th Sunday of Lent (March 25, 2012)**

<sup>20</sup> Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup> So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." <sup>22</sup> Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup> And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup> Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. <sup>27</sup> "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." <sup>29</sup> The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." <sup>30</sup> Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. <sup>31</sup> Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. <sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself."

***"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."***

So once every three years, in the Lectionary, these words are read. When else? In the graveside committal of almost every funeral I preach. I never read them, standing there beside a yawning hole six feet deep in the ground that I don't hear the words of Stephen Stills playing in my head. It's only a two minute song, with most of that guitar instrumental, but I always hear it. ***Find the cost of freedom, buried in the ground. Mother Earth will swallow you; lay your body down.*** Those are the entire lyrics.

It's a shame that we relegate such thoughts to only funerals.

But we have a national (if not larger) aversion to talking about, or thinking about death – the natural (although sometimes sometimes unnaturally caused) segment of every life. It's a doorway through which we will all travel, sometime. But we seem horrified to talk, or think, about it. There are some here today, already, who have grown uncomfortable with my talking this much about it.

But it's NOT ONLY a part of life. How we deal with death, indeed, shapes much of how we deal with life.

From **Janis Joplin's** "Freedom's just a nother word for nothing left to lose," to the **Rev'd Dr. Martin Luther King's** "If a person doesn't know what they are willing to die for, then they don't know how to live," **the way we think about, and handle death,** has **much to do with how we live.**

In this past two weeks – some because of sermon preparation and some out of coincidence – I’ve read four books that touch on this issue:

- ✦ **“Enjoy Every Sandwich,”** by Lee Lipsenthal, a 52 year old medical doctor who had no family history of cancer, who was diagnosed with esophageal cancer, which has a 90% mortality rate
- ✦ **“April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King’s Death and How It Changed America,”** by Michael Eric Dyson
- ✦ **“Faith & Illness: Reflections on God’s Sustaining Love,”** by Nancy Groves
- ✦ **“The Gift of Peace”** (the personal Reflections of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin on the last three years of his life, during which time he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.)

This last book I have read probably half a dozen times and have recommended or loaned to Lord only knows how many people.

Bernardin wrote, in reference to one of his hospitalizations: **“Pray while you’re well, because if you wait until you’re sick, you might not be able to do it.”** When people looked astonished at this minister saying this, he continued: **“I’m in so much discomfort that I can’t focus on prayer. My faith is still present. There is nothing wrong with my faith, but in terms of prayer, I’m just too preoccupied with the pain. I’m going to remember that I must pray while I am well!”**

When I first read those words over a decade ago, it made a solemn mark upon my memory about prayer.

(A related comment is: *I don’t like praying written prayers in church because they don’t always represent where my soul is.* And the answer given: **So, pray it anyway. There are people who need to pray for that need and they are not able to. Your prayer is done on their behalf. And the day will come when you need to pray for something and will not be able to. Know that someone else is praying your need on your behalf.** [The Gift of Peace, 67]

If we wait until we are in the depths of illness, sorrow, dark night of the soul, or valley of the shadow of death to think or talk about it, it might just be too late.

In today's Gospel, Jesus said, **“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ...”**

If we don't think about how to deal with these times before we arrive, then we are ill prepared for when the time does come. And, surely, it will indeed come for us all.

I recently was reading a blog on the internet about fifteen reasons why a young woman left the Church. One of them was:

**“14. I left the church because there are days when I'm not sure I believe in God, and no one told me that ‘dark nights of the soul’ can be part of the faith experience.”** [<http://rachelheldevans.com/15-reasons-i-left-church>]

Again, returning to Joseph Bernardin: He was blessed to have been friends with one of the greatest spirituality practitioners and writers of the twentieth century – Henri J.M. Nouwen. In the summer before Bernardin's November death, Nouwen asked if he might come and visit. In their conversation, Nouwen suggested that Bernardin try to quit thinking of death as an enemy, but instead to think of death as a friend.

He explained: **“It's very simple. If you have fear and anxiety and you talk to a friend, then those fears and anxieties are minimized and *could* even disappear. If you see them as an enemy, then you go into a state of denial and try to get as far away as possible from them.. People of faith who believe that death is the transition from this life to life eternal should see it as a friend.”** [The Gift of Peace, 128]

(Ironically, after giving that advice, and although he was nearly a decade younger than the dying Bernardin, Henri Nouwen ended up dying, suddenly and unexpectedly, some months before Bernardin did, from a sudden heart attack.)

As I considered their lives, that intersection of their lives, and their deaths, I was reminded once more of what Jesus said: **“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ...”**

Bernardin wrote that **“Time and time again I have stood in awe as people suffering from life-threatening illnesses have shared with me their insights into**

**life. I have been inspired to see how truly human and how truly wise they are. ... My decision to go through my cancer in public has been to share a simple message: faith really matters.”** [The Gift of Peace, 93-94]

My memory is still seared with the hospital visit I made, while in Clinical Pastoral Residency, at Ruby Memorial Hospital, in Morgantown. While on routine daily rounds, I stopped in to see a pastor (not anyone I'd ever met) who was a few years younger than me. He was married to a very attractive wife, who was with him. They had three young children at home. He had a terminal illness, although you would not know it to look at him. He looked very healthy. But looks can sometimes be deceiving. He had just been resuscitated from the brink of death a couple days before, and the process was excruciatingly painful for him. It brought him back, but did not change the reality that he was going to die very soon. After that episode, he had given the orders that no more was he to be subjected to these painful withdrawals from the inevitable. He had written a Do No Resuscitate Order.

I had been given his history before I entered the room. I went in with the idea of saying something wise, pastoral, profound, or something. I walked into the room, and saw how young, how vital, and how much in love, he and his wife were. And my mind went empty. I had nothing to say. Not a word. So – and this was probably in violation of something – I simply said to him: “Man! I just can't imagine what you're going through. You're a preacher. I'm older but much less experienced. Tell me, what should I be saying to you. What wisdom can you give me from where you are in life right now?

He didn't answer quickly, nor glibly. He paused and thought about it. Then he spoke simply and easily, “It's true. All the stuff that you and I preach. It's true. He's here with me and He's taking care of me. I don't want to leave my wife and family. But it's OK. It's all true.”

He told me the same thing that Bernardin wrote: **My decision to go through my cancer in public has been to share a simple message: FAITH REALLY MATTERS**

- ⌘ **Faith that really matters** allows us to be fully human. We don't have to hide behind pietistic platitudes.
- ⌘ **Faith that really matters** allows us to speak truthfully about the frustrations of life, and admitting when we feel like we are let down.
- ⌘ **Faith that really matters** does not require us to defend God. It's a whole lot more important to be real, to be honest, to be vulnerable.
- ⌘ **Faith that really matters** allows us to enter those valleys in life fearful, scared, or with so many questions, and come out with the freedom that missionary martyr Jim Elliott learned: He is not fool who gives up what he cannot hold onto in order to hold what he cannot lose.

We are in the 9<sup>th</sup> week of this 10 week series on the vows of membership. This fifth vow is **WITNESSING**. It is represented on the door of faith this week as **a picture of two people talking to one another**.

**Faith that really matters** is *not something we hide*. And faith that really matters allows us to **share with one another not just our certainties, but also our questions and our uncertainties**, because we believe in a **Lord who said that when He was lifted up He would draw ALL THINGS unto Him**.

Witnesses of that faith allow that Jesus longs to draw us unto Him *with all we are and all we have – loves, hates, certainties, questions. All we are. Love – reconciling love – does not require us to be perfect – just real*.

This is **THE FREEDOM WE FIND WHEN WE LOOK AT LIFE AND AT DEATH WITH THE FAITH THAT JESUS DRAWS IT ALL TOGETHER, AND WRAPS IT IN LOVE**. And **that love is what we are called to share**.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.