

“From Death to Life”
Ephesians 2:1-10
Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore
San Dimas Community Church United Church of Christ
March 26, 2006

This sermon theme was chosen to relate to the Ephesians text. But it took on a more profound meaning as I participated in the vigil of Malinda Chin moving from life to death and then from death to life. It is such a holy moment to share with a family their final goodbyes to one they deeply love. Perhaps it is more so when the passing is untimely like Malinda's. Mothers of young children are not suppose to die. Young, vibrant women should have years ahead of them to live fully a future. So to be present and watch the moments, the tenderness exchanged, the care and kindnesses offered between mother and child, husband and wife, brothers, sisters, and parent to child is truly sacred.

The scripture in Ephesians describes a life to death to life experience. It is what happens when we are born into this world. We are born with innocence, awaiting the possibilities before us. But then as we mature we cannot avoid the powers of a world that corrupt our innocence. We find we are compromised through the processes of living. The good we would do, we cannot always bring ourselves to do. We sometimes don't even know what the good is. We are born and then, then life happens!

Have you noticed on the side of roads or highways small crosses which have been placed as shrines marking the death of a loved one? It almost seems as though the pathways of our souls are marked by many small crosses where we have died just a little. We die when we acquiesce to less than our calling. There's a little cross that marks a tiny death when our best intentions betray us, when we knowingly or even unknowingly find we have compromised our integrity. We die when we place ourselves first and God last. We die when we ignore the cries of all God's creation. We die when we are too preoccupied to pay close attention to God's still speaking voice. There are tiny crosses along the pathways of our souls when we are overcome with loss and grief, when we feel abandoned by those we counted on, when we are lonely, when life comes to us with unwelcome change. Our lives are filled with little deaths even before our final passing. We are born and then we begin to die.

In chapter two of Ephesians, Paul is writing to people who he says were dead but who are now alive. How can this be? They were dead but now are alive in Christ. This aliveness is called grace, and it is a gift. We know this aliveness when we are no longer controlled by all those little deaths marked with small white crosses that tear at our souls. We are alive because in Christ we understand that death is not the final word. We are alive because we no longer live avoiding death. Death becomes an after thought because as Paul says: “we are what God has made us, created for good.”

The person who I find most helpful in understanding the life giving love of God in Christ is Walter Wink. He illuminates the dying of Christ as God's victory over the powers of this world. Everything in the world that drags us down, wears us out, defeats our best intentions are those same powers that threw themselves at Jesus. Jesus called people to be free of that which would control them so that they could be “what God had made them to be, created for good.” Jesus says, return to your true selves, return even if it means dying. Walter Wink describes the power of the cross this way:

How could this defeat issue in such a victory? The Powers were as powerful the day after the crucifixion as the day before. Nothing had visibly changed. And yet everything had changed. For now the Powers were forced to 'listen for the silent step of the dead man's invisible feet,' and to contend with a spirit that 'walks through walls.'

Wink takes an example from history to illustrate his point:

After Benigno Aquino had decided to renounce violence and commit himself to a nonviolent struggle against the Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, he deliberately chose to return from exile to almost certain death. He was shot by the military before he had even descended from the plane. His death changed nothing. Marcos was more powerful than ever, having disposed of his only viable rival. Yet his death changed everything. Two and a half years later, Marcos was nonviolently removed from power. But for those with eyes to see, Marcos fell when Aquino toppled to the tarmac....Jesus' death was like that...the cross revealed evil where one had always looked for good: in the guardians of the faith of the people. The religious elites rejected him and delivered him to the Romans for execution.

The cross also exposes the Powers as unable to make Jesus become what they wanted him to be, or to stop being who he was. Here was a person able to live out to the fullest what he felt was God's will. He chose to die rather than compromise with violence. The powers threw at him every weapon in their arsenal. But they could not deflect him from the trail that he and God were blazing. Because he lived thus, we too can find our own path. (pp.140-1)

But...but the good news is "you're gonna hear from him again." Whenever we are inspired to be faithful, whenever we are generous with the world's suffering, whenever we give what we can to offer a cup of water to the thirsty, "you're gonna hear from him again." Whenever we have courage in the face of death, courage to stand up and be counted, courage to speak truth to power..."you're gonna hear from him again." Whenever we become more fully the church of Jesus Christ and bear witness to the life Jesus lived and to the power of his message, "you're gonna hear from him again."

The good news is "you're gonna hear from him again" when we become the way of compassion, when we let justice roll and mercy fill the earth, when we are love, "you're gonna hear from him again."

"You're gonna hear from him again" when we do the ultimate act any human being can do of placing our trust in the One more powerful than we, and when we trust that that One will "lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth, from despair to hope, from hate to love."

We long for the world as God's complete creation to be led from death to life. Yet, it is in the intimacy of the vigil of our dying loved ones, that we decide if we will place our trust in God. We stand before the mystery of death, and we face our fears and we realize that the veil is very thin between the physical and spiritual worlds. And it is in those moments that we say "yes, we trust you, God" to take our hand and lead us.

We do not know all the mysteries that await us, but we know the One who holds those mysteries, and it is in that Holy One that we place our trust to lead us from death to life. AMEN