

Marvin Dale “Joe” Gronewold Funeral Service
“O Happy Death!”
Philippians 1:18-26
October 28, 2018

Joe was one of the three elders in the church when I first arrived in 1978, more than forty years ago now. That is a long time. I told the high schoolers in chapel on Friday that I had graduated from high school half a century ago and that I understood how long ago 1968 must seem to them. I told them that I remember President Lincoln driving by in his carriage *and only some of them laughed!*

But what is more remarkable is that I remember distinctly early in my ministry visiting Joe in the old Good Samaritan Hospital in Puyallup after his first heart attack. No one had heard of stents in those days and they did a bypass the old way. It was supposed to last for only a few years, but it lasted many. He had heart problems ever since but died last Sunday night at 86 years of age. The Lord extended his life far beyond what had been his expectation or ours.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is one of his most charming performances. He was under arrest in prison in Rome when he wrote the letter, but he expected to be released and eventually was. He would enjoy several more years of productive ministry before being arrested again as part of Nero’s pogrom against Christians and would be executed in the mid-60s of the first century. Paul was indefatigable. Even under arrest he took every opportunity to share the good news of Christ’s conquest of sin and death, even with his guards, and a number of them, he tells us earlier in this first chapter, had become Christians themselves.

Text Comment

By this time Paul had been under arrest in Rome for some time and, though we know none of the details, apparently events suggested to him that he would be released. But meantime he considered the two possibilities – life or death by execution – and frankly confessed that he would prefer death because death would take him immediately to Christ and to heaven. Death, he says, is not only “gain,” but “better by far.”

Now, it is one thing to say that death is to be preferred to life if life is dark and cheerless. There were those in the ancient world who thought death would be a gain for that reason. In one of Plato’s dialogues [*Ap.* 40, C-D] Socrates says, “And if there is no consciousness, but it is like a sleep when the sleeper does not even see a dream, death would be a wonderful gain.” There are many people in the world for whom life holds little attraction. Many of the suicide bombers in the Middle East prefer death, not only because they have been promised Paradise if they die for the cause, but because they have so little to live for otherwise. Many of them, by all accounts, are alienated, frustrated young men desperate for some purpose in life. John Updike’s novel, *Terrorist*, trades on this now familiar profile of the young male terrorist. Ahmad Mulloy, the son of an absent Muslim father and a lapsed Christian mother, alienated from his American culture, longs for a meaningful identity and finds it in becoming a champion of Islam and an enemy of all things Western. For him death is welcome because life is so cheerless.

No one has put the thought of death as a release from life more memorably than Shakespeare in his immortal soliloquy in *Hamlet*.

To be, or not to be – that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
 And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep –
 No more – and by a sleep to say we end
 The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep –
 To sleep – perchance to dream; ay, there's the rub,
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause. ...

Who would [burdens] bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
 No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than to fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all...

There is a near perfect expression of the worldly mind in the face of death: attraction and repulsion at one and the same time, and fear overcoming hope. Hamlet, torn by loneliness, sadness, and guilt, contemplates suicide. He craves release from the miseries of his life. But he cannot bring himself to take the fateful step because he doesn't know for sure what death will bring. Will it be, as he would fondly wish, "a sleep which ends the heartache, and the thousand natural shocks which flesh is heir to?" If so, he would welcome it. But perhaps death is not extinction after all. As he puts it, "For in that sleep of death what dreams may come... must give us pause." *He suffers from what G.K. Chesterton called the most universal experience of mankind: an uneasy conscience.* His guilty conscience made a coward of him. He suspects that if his existence does continue after death, it will not go well for him; he has too much to answer for.

But that was not Paul's situation. He was living a life chock full of the highest conceivable purpose. He had friends all over the world. He was at the very center of what God was doing in the world. He had experienced in his life as a Christian the most astonishing things and had seen the power of God at work in the most dramatic ways. Life was full and rich and important. Even in prison he had a purpose and was seeing it wonderfully fulfilled. His captors were becoming Christians, for goodness sake! As many difficulties and hardships as he had faced, his life was full of joy: the joy of believing, the joy of salvation, the joy of Christian friendship, the joy of bringing life to others, the joy of anticipation of things to come. Some of you may not be aware that it is the life of the Apostle Paul that has been for a great many people the culminating proof

that the Christian message is true, that Christ did rise from the dead; that the message of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ stands firmly on the foundation of history. Accounting for Paul, his life and writings, without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, without his appearance to Paul on the Damascus Road, has proved simply impossible for many thoughtful students of the first century.

And yet, full, rich, and happy as Paul's life was, *he was still eager to leave this world*. It was not just that he was ready to die or willing to die. That doesn't put the point strongly enough. Paul says it plainly: he *wanted to die!* To die in Christ is better to live even the noblest life.

Now the challenge of this text is precisely this: *do you want to die?* Do you have anything like Paul's mind about your own death? Paul was happy to go on living – rich and important as his life was – but he would have been even happier to learn that he was to die. Now, to be sure, no one is being asked to look forward to the slow, lingering, painful deaths that are now so commonly the lot of Christians and non-Christians alike in our modern world. I was delighted to learn that Joe's death apparently came suddenly but also quietly. He was in his pajamas, sitting on his bed, and simply lay back and was gone. No violence; perhaps no pain. Wonderful! *But we're not talking about dying, but about death itself, which is, after all, the far more important thing.*

Dying may not be anything to look forward to, but one can, multitudes of Christian believers have looked forward to death as Paul did. Paul not only did not fear death, he actually looked forward to it. Finding himself between the two alternatives of life and death – both of which had great attraction to him – he was like a great high school athlete being courted by several prominent universities, or a graduate at the top of his class at Harvard Law being courted by a number of prominent firms, or a beautiful young woman who can have her pick of suitors. His options were both wonderful and whatever happened to him would be someone else's dream come true.

Now, most of us aren't really thinking in these terms. I remember as a boy or young man sometimes lying in bed at night and having come over me the terrible realization that I must die. It was not a welcome thought at all. Death is, after all, as the Bible itself says, an enemy. But in the maturity of his Christian faith Paul had come to the place where he actually welcomed death. And why? Because, he says, if he lived he was *with* Christ and serving Christ, but if he died would be more *with* Christ, much more. For Paul it was proximity to Christ, nearness to Christ, communion with Jesus Christ that was the measure of everything! The Christian after he or she dies is *with Christ* to a degree impossible in this world. The separation between the visible and the invisible world is overcome. All that makes Christ here in this world a distant and shadowy figure, even to earnest Christians, will be left behind when you see him in his glory and that sight will drink up all your powers and make you in an instant a different and a wonderfully better person than you are now! No wonder Paul was looking forward to it!

If you remember, our Savior said a very similar thing to his disciples the night of his betrayal. He had been speaking to them about his leaving them to go to his Father and they had, understandably, been upset by that. They didn't want him to leave. His presence had been their life for those three years. And so, to comfort them he said,

“You heard me say, ‘I am going away, and I am coming back to you.’ *If you loved me, you would be glad* that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.”

That is, the disciples had been concentrating solely on the prospect of their own loss. If they truly loved Jesus, they would also think of *his gain*, going back as he was to his home, to his Father, and to the far greater glory of heaven. Paul had the same mind as Jesus. Going to heaven is the greatest conceivable thing for a human being. Next to it anything that a person might experience or accomplish in this world pales in comparison. Christians are absolutely right to think this way about the death of their loved ones. They may be desolate at the loss, at the separation, but death being what it is for a Christian, they could never ask that their loved one be given back to them, made to return to this world for their sake. The Christian knows that death is a very different thing for the believer who dies than it is for the one who is left behind!

Loved while on earth, nor less beloved tho' gone!
 Think not I envy you your crown;
 No, if I could, I would not call you down.
 Tho' slower is my pace,
 To you I'll follow on,
 Leaning on Jesus all the way,
 Who now and then lets fall a ray
 Of comfort from his throne.

[Augustus Toplady (1740-1778)]

There is nothing morbid here. Paul has nothing of the suicide bomber's alienation from the world or Hamlet's melancholy distaste for life. He is, in fact, happy to stay and work on for the gospel's sake, which, in fact he expects to do. He is not worried about being exposed to shame should he die because he is confident that God will approve him, first because of Christ's perfect righteousness which is his by faith, but also because he has served the Lord, certainly not perfectly but faithfully. He would later say, in his last work, 2 Timothy, written shortly before his death, that he had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith, and so there is laid up for him a crown of righteousness. That is the idea here too. He is not celebrating his achievements; he is simply saying that he has lived the life of a follower of Christ. With all his imperfections and failures – and Paul wasn't shy about admitting those – he has been a Christian man and lived a Christian life and done a Christian's work by the grace of God. Such a life will be followed by vindication – Jesus's own personal history demonstrates that wonderfully – and death is the doorway to that happy triumph.

Dying can be painful, to be sure, but even in such a case that painful, mournful journey is, at last, only the last difficult climb to the summit where vistas await you of unimaginable beauty. As Bunyan beautifully put it in *Pilgrim's Progress*, where he describes the pilgrims' crossing of the last river, Bunyan's metaphor for death:

“...when they tasted of the water of that river over which they were to go, they thought that it tasted a little bitterish to the palate, but it proved sweeter when it was down.”

Now it requires no particular daring on my part to say that few of us can honestly claim to share Paul's cheerful and eager anticipation of death. Our lives are so full of what we can see, hear, and touch; our faith is so weak and our sight of the unseen world so dim; we have invested so much of our hope for happiness and reward *in this life* and *this world* that it is hard for us to have the same relish for death as did the clear-sighted apostle. But there is no doubt – no Christian can doubt – that we *ought* to think about death as Paul did and we *ought* to welcome it as cheerfully as he did, and we ought to contemplate it with anticipation as he did. Anyone who believes the gospel knows that! Heaven is better than earth by far.

We certainly want Paul's peace and joy do we not? He begins this paragraph talking about his own joy and ends it talking about helping the Philippians onward to joy and the entire section drips with the happiest, healthiest outlook on life. He's untroubled no matter what comes! We want to be like that. Take the worst – death itself – and Paul is looking forward to it! We want that for ourselves in this sad world. And that is what the message of Jesus Christ is all about: the conquest of death and life everlasting, the promise of paradise to those who believe in him.

If there remains at the end of our pilgrimage a black curtain, guarded by a grim reaper, and if each hour and each day takes us closer to what we fear, then having a genuinely sunny outlook on life is not easy, not unless we do what most do and simply ignore the fact of death, deny it by resolutely turning our minds away from it. But happiness of that kind is a sham. It is only happiness because we refuse to face facts. We are all going to die and *that* is the fact. And death is coming faster than any of us wish to admit. That is the simple truth. And what will death bring? *That* is the question. It used to be the question that serious people all reckoned with; it is the measure of the triviality of our culture that hardly anybody thinks about it any longer. Happiness based on the denial of death or a refusal to consider what death may bring is a sham and will stand up neither to the rigors of life in this world nor to the judgments of the Lord. The real thing stands any test as Paul shows us here. So little was death a threat to Paul's happiness that he found himself wishing he could die sooner rather than later. Happy to live so long as we can live for Christ; eager to die when the time comes so as to be with Christ. Everyone can have that happy outlook; because Jesus Christ offers it to everyone who trusts in him. Joe Gronewold trusted in Jesus Christ and he wasn't afraid of death. He talked more frequently of late about that. It found him ready and waiting! And it can find you in the same way.

If you were going to take a trip, say to Italy, as two of my daughters and sons-in-law did this last summer, you would as they did read in advance some guidebooks in order to make the most of your journey. They knew what they were going to see before they left. They had many wonderful experiences they hadn't planned for, but they knew beforehand where they were going and what they wanted to see. The anticipation built as the time of departure drew near.

As my sister was dying, now some twenty-two years ago, through the last month of her life, I called her every morning and, for half an hour or so, read to her from some guidebooks; we, as it were, planned her journey. Christians can do this. They know where they are going and in a general way what they will experience when they arrive at their destination. I read to her from the Bible of course, the best guidebook of all, and its glorious descriptions of the heavenly country and the life of the world to come. The Bible has much to tell us about both the journey and the destination. But I read to her from many other books as well: the river-crossing scenes

from the two parts of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; from Alexander Whyte's sermons and Samuel Rutherford's *Letters*, from Dante's *Paradiso* and Adolphe Monod's *Farewell*. We loved those times together thinking about where she would soon be and what she would soon see. And all of that, I found, made me think very differently about both my sister's death and about my own. I found in my own heart and mind, I think for the first time in a powerful and lasting way, at least the beginnings of that anticipation of death to which Paul gives voice here in Philippians chapter 1.

But, remember this, it is Christ that draws Paul's attention forward through death to what is beyond. The more you see, the more you live with, the more you serve Jesus *here* the more you will anticipate being with him *there!* The more clear it is to you that Jesus Christ died in ignominy and immeasurable suffering so that your death could be a triumphant ascent to heaven, the more you will see death for what it is: one short, dark passage to everlasting light. This is not wishful thinking, Jesus Christ rose from the dead. This is the sure and certain hope of everlasting life; the exhilarating and never-ending experience of everything human beings were made for and long for! Joe, a Christian man, is gone from us; but what does this mean?

And death itself, to him, was but
 The wider opening of the door
 That had been opening, more and more,
 Through all his life, and ne'er was shut.

And never shall be shut. He left
 The door ajar for you and me,
 And, looking after him, we see
 The glory shining through the cleft.