

## Life from Death 2 Lent B

An artist asked the gallery owner if there had been any interest in his paintings on display at that time.

“I have good news and bad news,” the owner replied. “The good news is that a gentleman inquired about your work and wondered if it would appreciate in value after your death. When I told him it would, he bought all 15 of your paintings.”

“That’s wonderful,” the artist exclaimed. “What’s the bad news?”

“The guy was your doctor!”

The good news is death equals life. Until death occurs life cannot spring forth. We celebrate this season of Lent forgetting that Lent is the word for Spring and Spring means death yields to life.

The human body is an example of life arising from death! Any child who has scraped her knee knows that when the Band-Aid comes off life has been at work!

Death is a part of life. In fact, we wouldn’t be alive without it.

Cells are dying all the time in our bodies. And these are not random deaths — they are programmed deaths for our own good.

Look at your hand. It has five fingers because the cells that used to live between them died way back when you were an embryo. Embryos as small as eight to 16 cells in size depend on cell death — if it did not occur, our human development would go off course. You might say that if it were not for death, we would not even be born.

Cell death is what keeps us from being overrun with cancer. Natural surveillance systems — such as the one involving the p53 protein, nicknamed “the guardian of the genome” — detect almost all cancerous mutations and direct the affected cells to commit suicide.

These cancer cells die so that we might live.

Jesus knew that “the Son of Man” *must* undergo great suffering and be killed. He must die because of the benefit this brings to the greater whole. Jesus dies to pay the price for our sins. Jesus dies to reconcile us to God. Jesus dies to show us how much God loves us. Jesus dies to call us to follow him in suffering service. Jesus dies to achieve victory over death. Jesus dies so that we might live.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (8:34). To become a follower of Jesus means to be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of all. It means to be willing to deny ourselves for the benefit of the larger human organism.

Thomas Cannon did this in a truly remarkable way. He was a postal worker in Richmond, Virginia, who lived much of his life on the edge of poverty so that he could give to those in need. Describing himself as “a poor man’s philanthropist,” he gave away more than \$150,000 to people who were experiencing hard times, or who had been unusually kind or brave. He gave these gifts over the last 33 years of his life, mostly in \$1,000 checks.

He traced his inspiration to his time in the Navy. While he was away at signal school, there was a shipboard explosion at the Port of Chicago, and many of his shipmates were killed. He concluded that he was spared for a reason — to help others, to be a role model, to inspire people to see what he called “the oneness of it all.”

Cannon gave to people of all ages, races, nationalities and incomes. He gave checks to a low-income woman who started a youth center in her apartment complex ... to a retired postal worker who was a regular volunteer at an elementary school ... to a woman and man who wanted to return to Vietnam to visit their hometown ... to an advocate for the victims of crime ... and to a teenager who had been abandoned as an infant, but grew up to be named Virginia’s Youth of the Year.

This generosity did not come without sacrifice. Cannon supported his wife, his two sons, himself and his charitable efforts on a salary that never exceeded \$20,000 a year. When he retired from the postal

service in 1983, he and his wife lived near the poverty line on his pension. “We lived simply,” he said before his death in 2005, “so we could give money away.”

He wasn’t unhappy about these sacrifices. In fact, he had a great sense of humor, one that he maintained even after being diagnosed with terminal cancer. As his health was failing, he told the Richmond newspaper, “A Baptist deacon who owed me \$200 died recently. First thing I’m going to do when I get to the other side is run him down.”

Thomas Cannon did not want a foundation to be set up to continue his work after his death. He feared that a foundation would require a bureaucracy, and tons of paperwork. He didn’t even want his name attached to anything. He left just one simple request:

“Help somebody.”

To become a follower of Jesus means to be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of all. It means to be willing to deny ourselves for the benefit of the larger human organism. It means, in the words of Thomas Cannon, to “help somebody.”

So how do we do this?

Let’s look again at the cells in our body, and notice that the upside of death involves *seeing the big picture, fighting the good fight, and knowing when to get out of the way*. Put these activities together, and you can discover what it means to deny yourself and follow Jesus. You can also see how those who lose their lives for the right reasons will actually save their lives for all eternity.

**See the big picture.** As we heard the scriptures read this morning there was a thread that connected all three passages. It was death producing life. Abraham could not be the righteous ruler of a great nation that God had intended for him unless his faith could be tested. The greatest test for Abraham was to lose his greatest possession – his son, a gift to him and Sarah in their old age. Isaac was a gift of hope to a nation not even born. By giving up his son Abraham could see through God’s eyes the foundation of faith upon which he would

build a people. God gives such vision today to help his people see how death is overcome by life in new and exciting ways.

Paul in his letter to the Romans spoke of God being for us. He saw the big picture seeing that God who gave up his son Jesus would also give us everything else. God justifies us. God intercedes for us. God unites us through Christ's love. God makes us conquerors. We can let go of this life knowing that death can never separate us from true love – God's love!

**Fight the good fight.** First we have to pick out the good fights. Some battles are a waste of time and effort. They leave us feeling worn out, frustrated and even sick. Our bodies are healthy when their cells are fighting the good fight, and our bodies are not healthy when our cells are not fighting that fight. When people back on the East Coast ask me how it's going with the ministry I tell them, "I'm in the fight of my life." Why? Because the purpose of my life is to spend it and expire giving life to others. When, Roger Hencke told me something had to be done about the safety of walking across E. Court St from this church's front door we took the good fight to Janesville's leaders and wrestled against the politics of this town because it was the right thing to do. Fight the good fight. And if you die fighting, it's okay, just make sure you picked a good fight, a fight worth dying for.

**Know when to get out of the way.** White blood cells have an important job to do in wiping out infections in our bodies, but when they are done with their work they self-destruct in a very orderly fashion.

Before Thomas Cannon's death, he asked that no foundation be set up to keep his name alive. He knew that when his work on earth was over, it was over. And Jesus tells us that those who save their life will lose it, but "those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:35).

In the life of the church, people have a hard time getting out of the way. Older pastors want their pictures to be hung, their words remembered and repeated. Retired church members want the hymns of their childhood to be sung every week in worship. Baby boomers

want their children to follow their examples, and Gen-Xers and Millennials want to know if their music has a place in church. **At some point, each of us has to remember that the church of Jesus Christ has been handed to us, and our job is to hand it to the people who follow us.** To let go and get out of the way is a tremendous act of faith, showing the world that the church belongs to Christ, and not to us.

It takes a “death” of self in order to be utterly unconcerned about the glory but radically concerned about the blessing.

The only credit report we need to worry about is the one God keeps, and only God is privy to its contents.

Death is a part of the Christian faith. In fact, there would be no faith without it. We need a cross before an empty tomb, a Good Friday before an Easter morning, and the execution of the Son of Man before the resurrection of the Son of God.

Death equals life: That’s an equation we can live with. It adds up! Are we God’s people willing to do the math? AMEN

*Holley, Joe. “Thomas Cannon dies; postal clerk lived like a pauper to help others.” The Washington Post, July 4, 2005, B5.*

*Holmes, Bob. “Life’s top 10 greatest inventions.” New Scientist, April 9, 2005, NewScientist.com.*