

Love in the face of death

A wise person once said: "All of us grow up knowing that we are going to die. And none of us believe it!" What a powerful statement.

Intellectually, yes, we know we are going to die. It's an idea we accept. We see death happening to others around us. But all of us have a hard time really believing that one day the sun will come up, and we won't be here to say hello. In this month of November, dedicated to praying for the faithful departed, it might be a good time to reflect on how faithfully we will depart.

The main means of departure from this world usually boil down to the big three: age, illness or accidents. (I remember a humorist being asked, "What is the leading cause of death?" He responded, "Birth!")

The means of departure will vary. The more profound question, however, is how we will face that death. I think we will die with the same integrity with which we have lived.

Allow me to tell two stories. Both come from one of the darkest chapters in human history, the holocaust.

One story is about a group of Jews being herded into the gas chamber. Suddenly, one of the women, a ballerina, stepped out of the crowd about to be executed and began to dance. The guard yelled at her to stop, and she continued dancing. He then shot her.

That story left a lasting impression on me. Obviously, there were probably dozens of similar displays of courage in those death camps, but no one lived to record them. This lady died doing her dance. She would have been gassed to death with her fellow prisoners in a few minutes anyway. She wanted to die doing her dance, defying fear of death with a dance of life. May we all have the courage to face our fears during life with similar courage, so that when we face death itself, our courage will defeat even death.

The second story came from Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychologist, who survived the

concentration camps. In his account of life in the Nazi death camps, he said that on various occasions people would give away their last ounce of bread to a child or fellow prisoner. They made a decision to die as they had lived – not selfishly clinging to life one more day, but giving life to another person for one more day. They died with the same integrity with which they had lived!

Frankl coined that famous expression: “As long as we have a Why to live for, we can overcome any What!” We all need to have meaning, to have the answers to why, so that we can face any trial. If we have found meaning in life, then we will find meaning in death.

We will die as we have lived. If we have lived with faith, we will likely die with faith. If we have lived with doubt, we will likely die with doubt.

Humanly, none of us lives perfectly, so none of us will die perfectly. As one of the lines from a hymn goes, “We all have secret fears to face, our minds and motives to amend!” In some of the Gospel accounts, Jesus is sweating blood in his agony before death. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is perfectly calm and in charge. The Gospels let us know that there are different traditions as to how Jesus faced death. In Mark, Jesus cried out: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” In Luke, Jesus says: “Into your hands I commend my Spirit!”

In all the Gospels, however, Jesus is finally portrayed as surrendering to his Father’s will. We are all wired differently. We all live differently. Likely we will all die differently. However, if we have commended our lives to God while we are alive now, we will likely find it easier to commend our lives to God at the moment of death. And keep in mind the words of the “good thief,” “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He even stole heaven. So can we, choosing faith over fear, choosing love in the face of death.