

What can death teach us?

There's a story told of a man who said that he knew someone who knew the exact year, month, day, and hour that he would die. His friend replied, "He must have been quite an 'enlightened being.' How did he come to know that?" The other man replied, "The judge told him!"

If death and resurrection are at the heart of Lent, clearly death is our least favorite part. We do all that we can, through exercise and diet and supplements and regular medical check-ups, etc - to deny, or at least delay, the enemy we call death.

Yet, if we really hear the words of Christ to "die to ourselves" (not kill ourselves or injure our selves), then death must have value. What can death teach us?

Well, allow me to take you through an exercise that a spiritual director took his listeners through. He suggested that we meditate on death. It was a suggestion not warmly embraced by the group! But he continued by inviting people to picture themselves in the coffin, then to see their bodies in the graves decaying, then to picture only their bones remaining, and then, finally, to picture themselves as no more than dust.

Needless to say, a few people were upset by the exercise.

But then he continued and asked, "From that position, how many of the things you are worried about now will matter then?"

In the grave, will it matter that I didn't get that card, or a call back, or an invitation to the party, or that person saying something nasty to me, and on and on. Most of the things we upset ourselves about will have no meaning at all then. Then he added, "It is only when we are not afraid to die that we can truly enjoy life."

You and I are so conditioned to equate life with this physical body of ours, that we go to great lengths to keep our physical bodies alive. Yet, despite our best efforts, and even our longest lives into our 100s, our lives are so short. An Italian poet said something like: "Our lives are like a shooting star that crosses the sky for but a brief moment, and then it is night forever."

That thought can scare us, or it can wake us up. We have no time to waste on our grudges and resentments and hurt feelings. Realizing how short life is we want to enjoy each sunrise, each drop of rain, each breeze, each person. We want to live so intensely in the now that the future loses its power over us. We want to concentrate so fully on loving others that we don't waste a second worrying if others love us in return. The only power Jesus had was the power to love. He couldn't make a single person love him. And many of the most powerful people of his time did not love him. Jesus did not let others deter him from his mission. He continued to love, to heal, to forgive, to bless and so on. Don't waste time worrying whether others love you. Just love them!

And, if you remember a column I wrote a short time ago about the "Me," the "I" and the "Spirit," it helps us to face death differently. The "Me" is the flesh and blood that deteriorates in the grave. The "I," is the observing part of me that watches me write this column, and will also observe the "Me" disappearing in the grave. And the "Spirit" that is God in my life now, will be bonded with the "I" in eternity.

So, when Jesus tells us to die to ourselves, he is calling us to die to the "Me" with all its cravings and fears and anxieties, and to be aware of the soul that is "I" and the Spirit that is God. Lent, then, is a 'dress rehearsal' for dying to what is not of God. On the day of resurrection, we will rise bodily, get literally a new "Me," finally fully attached to love that is God. So, you see, death is not the enemy. Fear is the enemy. And love will cast out fear if we let it!