

“On Seeing the Elephant and Hearing the Owl”

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Texts: Romans 14:7-8, Psalm 118:24

Community Christian Church - Kansas City, Missouri

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8:30 a.m. (Chapel), 9:20 a.m. (Sanctuary), 10:45 a.m. (Sanctuary)

This morning, I'd like to think the title of my sermon has quickened your curiosity and whetted your interest. Sermon titles are meant to do that, you know, that and more. Ultimately the title and the sermon itself should keep your interest long enough and seriously enough so that something important can happen between us, between preacher and congregation, so that something significant can occur in a worshipful moment.

In regard to keeping your attention, I'm reminded of an old story about a fire-and-brimstone preacher who used a particular gimmick to try to keep folks alert and attentive. During sermon time, one particular unalert man always fell asleep on the back pew.

The preacher had enough of the man's rudeness and decided he would teach him a lesson. So, he began his sermon as he always did, slow-paced and low-toned. And like he always did, the rude man soon fell into a deep asleep.

Then, the preacher said to the congregation, "Everyone who wants to go to Heaven, stand up." Everyone stood up, except for the man who snoring on the back pew.

The preacher then motioned for everyone to sit down. Then he said quietly, "Now, everyone who wants to go to Hell...", and then, with a slamming bang of his hand on the pulpit and a shout in his voice, proclaimed, "STAND UP!"

The sleeping man on the back pew was startled, woke up, and leaped to his feet as everyone around stifled their laughter. Then the man looked at everyone seated around him, then looked at the preacher and said, "Preacher, I don't rightly know what we're votin' on. But it looks like you and me are the only ones for it."

This morning, there'll be no such trickery to keep your interest. And there'll certainly be no fire-and-brimstone preaching to arrest your attention. Instead, the sermon focuses on one of the fundamentals of faith: facing death with grace.

This sermon borrows its title from an old phrase connected with the harrowing encounters experienced by Western pioneers and soldiers engaged in combat.¹ In old western novels the phrase "seeing the elephant and hearing the owl" means to face something that stops you "dead in your tracks," either literally or metaphorically.

That's a good phrase, I think, for dealing with this very touchy subject. If we're abjectly honest, questions about death arise in each of us along the faith journey: "How do we pass the 'test' of facing our mortality with grace and peace? What will it be like when I have to 'meet my day'?"

Of all the “First Things” of faith – along with trusting God enough to let go of our anxieties and holding on to love for dear life, knowing that love is the greatest power accessible to human beings – facing death with grace is surely among the most important tasks for people of faith. Try as we might, we can never finally evade the truth of death’s inevitability. As John Irving put it so tellingly in his brilliant novel *The World According to Garp*, “... we are all terminal cases.”²

And yet, we do try, don’t we? It used to be, say, in the Victorian age, that folks reveled, sometimes gloried in death-talk, while, at the same time, evading like the plague any reference to sexuality. These days, the opposite is the case, isn’t it? We revel at ever turn and all times in all things sexual, while, simultaneously, avoiding any references whatsoever to the death. As a friend once said to me in all seriousness, “Death’s a real downer, man.”

But death, and dealing with it, need not be such a downer for any of us. In fact, if our faith is truly empowering, we can see the elephant and be ready hear the owl with renewed purpose and surety.

The apostle Paul gives us direction for facing death with grace. In his grand correspondence with the Christians situated in Rome, he speaks to them about what it means to live at peace.

Paul writes urgently about the call to unity among their supposed factions. There were apparent squabbles going on among the Roman Christians about matters that were proving to be divisive. Differences regarding diet and observances of certain holy days were apparently prompting expressions of judgment and condemnation between the brothers and sisters in the Church. In the midst of calming their passions, he describes one of the most memorable and profound theological truths in the New Testament: “... if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”³

His claim, on the surface of his declaration, is about their unity as Christians. But the implications and the depth of his insights are about so much more.

Death, Paul is asserting, need not be feared nor rejected nor evaded. Why did Paul believe this? Why did he have such confidence in the face of that common denominator which divides its way into the lives of all human beings? How did Paul have such audacity to solve a dispute about kosher laws and worship observances with such deep theology?

Somehow, Paul knew that every one of us will eventually see the elephant and hear the owl call our name. And he knew that we can have supreme confidence in meeting those moments with the powerful presence of a loving God. His phrase tells it all: “We are the Lord’s.”

Life Is Always Communal

In proclaiming “We are the Lord’s” Paul is emphasizing the communal nature of faith. The Christian journey is, at its basic level, a “we” proposition.” Yes, there are always dimension of individuality among those who follow after the master carpenter from Nazareth, most noticeably responsibility and accountability. But, ultimately the dimension of community is the trump card in this path we call “Christianity.” “We are the Lord’s,” Paul affirms. Not just some, not just a few, but “we.”

Life Is Always Communion with God

Secondly, Paul asserts that “We are *the Lord’s*.” Meaning? We do not live or move or have being apart from our Creator. We belong to God. We are with God, from the moment we take in our first earthen breath beyond the womb. And we continue with God all of our days. We are with God even in the midst of our dying. “We are *the Lord’s*.” God is always in communion with us.

No doubt, some of you hear in the sermon title an echo of Margaret Craven’s novel *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. In that beautiful story, Mark Brian, a young Anglican vicar, is sent by his Bishop to the Tsawataineuk tribe at Kingcome Village in British Columbia. The Bishop has sent Rev. Brian there in order that he might “know enough of the meaning of life to die.”⁴ Rev. Brian takes on his new responsibilities with vigor, love, courage, and a deep, abiding respect for the life and ways of the Indian folk who become his family.

While the lives of the people of the village are Rev. Brian’s focus and his principal concern, death also dominates his experiences in the village: the death of village members, the death of the culture of the Tsawatainek and his own impending death. This latter death is kept from him, until late into his stay at the village when he “hears the owl call,” the traditional Indian sign that one’s death is approaching. But though the terminal nature of his disease had been hidden from him for so long, and though he is young, what the bishop intended by sending him to Kingcome Village has been accomplished: he knows enough of the meaning of life and he is ready to die with a sense of nobility, with peace, and with a rare resoluteness.

This is the focus for the apostle Paul, too. If we know deep down that life is communal (“We are the Lord’s”) and that life is communion (“We are *the Lord’s*”), we have enough of the meaning of life to be ready to live and die with grace.

Some of the rest of us may also hear in the sermon title an echo of our own experience.

Last August, slightly more than five months ago, I experienced an event which makes this morning’s sermon a very personal one indeed for me. I’ve recently dubbed this my “intimate brush with extreme mortality.” It’s technical name is Acute Myocardial Infarction (AMI).

And as you know, I was blessed by a quick response from the EMT's (two and a half minutes) and equally quick treatment by Dr. Ken Huber and his team at St. Luke's Hospital (an hour and twenty minutes). Because of their rapid response, the damage to my heart was minimized and my recuperation quotient was maximized.

Now, after good food, wonderful medicine, excellent guidance by the cardio rehab team, your unceasing prayers, and mega doses of Priscilla's love, I'm in the best shape I've been in for more than 20 years.

In the middle of the heart crisis, and then over the course of the immediate recovery period that followed, I had ample time to reflect on the AMI experience. It was then that I remembered something startling. I recalled Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words just before the end of his life: *"This is the end – for me the beginning of life."*⁵ I didn't exactly have Bonhoeffer's sanguine attitude when the AMI was upon me, but, in the midst of the crisis, I remembered, there was no panic. Priscilla and I both met the event unagitated and with equanimity. I recall that when the EMT's showed up, I went limp and relaxed. And even though they had a bit of trouble getting my blood pressure to rise up high enough so they could administer some pain medication, I was calm. "This could be my time," I supposed, as the ambulance raced to the emergency room.

After the traumatic part of the experience came the time for reflection. There, in the peace and tranquility of our West Wing (our name for our den), it startled me to recall the calmness which colored the entire experience. I wondered if I had passed what my friend Forrest Church used to call "the death test."⁶ We ministers so often assist others in meeting death and preparing for life's final earthly transition. But what will our demeanor be and what will we do when it comes time for us to meet death?

I also pondered the countless Community members and numberless other Christians who have faced death with peace and surety. Then I resolved I'd tell you one day what I had discovered.

#1 – We can follow in the footsteps (and in the heartbeats) of those who have gone before us and trust that their ways are good ways for meeting the moment when we see the elephant and hear the owl. We can face death with grace by learning from the graceful ways of our communal resource of faith. The Christian faith tradition has immense blessings in it that are truly magnificent, if we will but allow them to soak into our souls. On the faces of those we love, those who love us so much, is written, at the time of extreme crisis, the very grace of God. I believe the reason why there was such calm in our household on the fateful day of August 14, 2010, was the calm and resoluteness and peace in the hundreds of faithful ones we have known. As a pastor there has been an accrual of qualities within me from the people whom I have been privileged to accompany on their final journey. Equanimity prevailed that day because there has been equanimity in the hearts and heads and hands of numberless folks who have taught us the true meaning of life. How have folks learned peace in the face of the extremis of death? By going to church, and worshipping regularly, and saying their

prayers, and giving daily expression to their faith. Such routine matters are the stuff of which greatness and great grace are made.

#2 – A heart attack, literally and metaphorically, is a demand that we slow down. If we know clear down into the sinews of our deepest selves that “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s,” then we need not live life in haste nor waste time being frenetic and frantic. Life is meant to be savored, appreciated, luxuriated in. Not gulped or gobbled or swallowed whole. In fact when we do gulp, gobble, and swallow life whole, we may just be hastening our deaths and shortening our lives.

#3 – It’s time for all of us to give up the delusion that we are not going to die. Our denial that gravity will not get us all is a self-imposed fantasy and has no basis in reality. By accepting that our earthly lives are finite, we can, in fact, increase our engagement with them and our enjoyment of each other, making and allowing every minute of our time together count. Death can be approached not as a terminus but as a transformational moment. In the grand grammar of grace, we realize that, as a folk preacher once said, death is not a period but a comma.

#4 – You really can’t take it with you. So you’d better give it away. And better than giving away our material possessions and our money is the opportunity to give away something else. And what would that be? Not money or possessions. Not treasured heirloom antiques or property. Not things at all. The only “substance” that makes life valuable in any ultimate sense is the love we share with others. Our greatest asset is the love we give away. It is the only aspect of our lives that truly increases in value over time. Better than the finest wine, more precious than the rarest gemstone. And it is the only aspect of our lives that is magnified when we transfer it to others. No one is ever lessened by giving love away. In fact, our love’s shelf-life multiplies when it is given to others. So, a clear-eyed sighting of the elephant and clarion-eared hearing of the owl empowers us to love one another with fierce clarity and refined tenderness. When we know that death is a comma and not a period, we are freed to live a life of love, love, and more love.

#5 – Get busy rejoicing! Our temporal earthly lives, when measured against the backdrop of all that has gone before us – billions of years of chronological time – and all that will come after we’ve departed from this zip code – also billions and billions of years, at the very least! – are fleeting and preciously brief. So, without haste or frenzy, we are called to get busy rejoicing. The Psalmist put this insight into absolute clarity when the happy declaration was made: “This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”⁷

Yes, there have been yesterdays, and they are good to recall and learn from and treasure. But we live in *this* day.

Yes, there’s always tomorrow, and it beckons us to be hopeful and to prepare as best we can so we won’t be caught off guard. (To fly on a plane tomorrow I need to buy a ticket before hand.)

But the greatest gift we have been given, the best occasion for living our lives, is today. *This* is the day that the Lord has made!

And what else can or would we want to do with such a gift than rejoice?! We have been made as rejoicing creatures. We are so constituted that we are not fulfilled until we rejoice. Life has been given to all of us for celebrating and not merely tolerating. So get busy rejoicing!

If you are at your home, choose something to celebrate. On your job or in the classroom, there's always time for a quiet celebration, perhaps even a silent celebration. At the end of a day, when you wrapping up the leftovers of your work and putting to bed the demands of your on-going tasks, there's always time for a little celebration. There's always time for rejoicing and being glad! The God of the universe who got you up this morning waits to rejoice with you throughout the day and then to meet you in gladness before your weariness carries you away into sleep. The God who brought you into this world, hopes for you to rejoice each and every day of your earthly journey. And, if we are out-and-out plainly, bluntly honest with ourselves, this same Lord will rejoice with us even in the moment of our deaths, when what appears to us to be a period is revealed to be the cosmic comma that it is.

So, remember: Life is always communal. Life, when it's at its best, is always communion with God. Other footsteps (and heartbeats) can show us the way. Slow down. It's time for all of us to give up the delusion that we are not going to die. You really can't take it with you, but the love you give away will last for an eternity. Get busy rejoicing!

As you will continue to hear me say, most nearly every Sunday, God bless us all, I love you. Amen.

NOTES

1 An early literary reference to "seeing the elephant and hearing the owl" can be found O'Henry's short story "*The Higher Abdication*" in *Heart of the West* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913), p. 137.

2 John Irving, *The World According to Garp* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978)

3 Romans 14:8

4 Margaret Craven, *I Heard the Owl Call My Name* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1973), p. 144.

5 Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, revised edition (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000), p. 927.

6 From personal conversations with Forrest, over several years. Please also see his excellent book *Love and Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

7 Psalm 118:24.