

**You Asked for It: Matters of Life and Death
Biblical Perspectives on our National Debate
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: Genesis 1 & 2**

Consider two scenes from contemporary life:

The adult children have been summoned to the hospital by their mother, concerned for their gravely-ill father who wavers between coherence and confusion. “The doctor thinks he should have surgery, but I don’t know. To put him through that doesn’t seem right. And they need to put a feeding tube in, so he gets nourishment. But when is it time to let him go? He wouldn’t want to live like this. I just know it. We talked about it, but we never got around to writing anything down. I don’t know what to do.”

Another family gathers in the family home, around the bedside of their mother, in the late stages of “Lou Gehrig’s Disease.” They talk quietly of happy memories and anticipated plans. Each family member expresses love for the mother, and she to them. Finally, she says “It’s time. I’m so tired, and I’m ready to go to sleep.” Their minister offers a prayer of commendation, and a trusted friend administers morphine through an IV.

Both of these scenes represent real situations that I have witnessed as a pastor. They are scenes played out every day, reflecting the strides in medical knowledge and technology that can extend human life far longer than ever before. Individuals and families are increasingly faced with complex choices about treatment, life support, and long-term care that literally become matters of life and death. In the events around the death of Terry Schiavo, we have watched one family’s personal tragedy become a media circus with politicians posturing and preachers pontificating. I am especially glad a number of you requested a sermon

considering end-of-life issues because the religious view I hear most often (and most loudly) expressed is contained in a single affirmation: that human life is sacred and must be preserved at all cost. We'll set aside for the moment the inconsistencies in this perspective when it comes to supporting war or capital punishment. The fact is, I believe our Judeo-Christian faith is far more nuanced than some of its adherents recognize or admit. The moral dilemmas posed by the staggering amount of scientific knowledge humankind has gained were unimagined in the biblical era. I believe that faithful action today requires that we add this amazing body of information to the mix of scripture and experience. The mainline church has not spoken out as clearly as we might on end-of-life issues, thereby causing many to conclude that the "right to life" perspective is the only religious one. One who requested this topic even characterized the debate as a dichotomy between those who see human life as sacred and those who see it as natural. I'm sympathetic with that distinction, but I'm not ready to let one single viewpoint hold exclusive control over religious language and insight.

Which will explain my choice of scripture readings for today. The Psalm poetically celebrates God's creative hand in nature, but even more points to the innate relationship God enjoys with creation. God is pictured as the gracious provider of food and blessing to all living beings. Life is sacred because God established a relationship with creation right from the start. There is purpose and meaning in the universe.

Genesis, the biblical book of beginnings for both Jews and Christians, strongly affirms this. In the first creation story of Genesis chapter one, God designs the elements of the world and declares each in turn "good." But the second creation story adds another element, a critically important one, which makes another point to the topic at hand. Listen for God's word in the reading from Genesis chapters one and two.

[READING—Genesis 1:26-31; Genesis 2:4-9, 15-17]

When I received my doctorate, a friend gushed to my young son that wasn't he proud of his mother becoming a doctor. Paul, nonplused, and apparently trying to set the record straight, replied: "Yeah, but it's not the kind of doctor that helps you." He was right of course; so rather than subject you to my largely non-medical perspective, I spoke with three Fairmount physicians about their experience and wisdom on end-of-life issues. While each had varying views, all spoke immediately of our society's culture of denial around death. We don't talk about it and we don't want to talk about it. We joke that getting old is better than "the alternative" and move quickly to another topic. In past times, palliative care was frequently the only medical option available—the role of the physician was to provide comfort and pain reduction. Today, however, there is greater pressure on the medical community to "cure" all illness and bodily injury. Whereas our grandparents were more likely to view death as a natural part of life, we tend to see it as an unwelcome intruder, an unnatural outcome to the illnesses that invade our bodies. The consequence of this denial is fear, which becomes a powerful motivator to preserve life no matter what. The fear of death, authorized by a misunderstanding of the sanctity of life, has been codified in both medical practice and governmental policy. The relative silence of the mainline church has left this fear largely unchallenged.

It could be different. Consider with me again the biblical creation stories. God creates and imparts something of Godself into the very essence of each man and woman; in mystery and miracle the divine image is entwined with the human's DNA. Human life is sacred by its very nature. It is to be respected, valued, protected. But note what else the text identifies as an equal part of the human equation: choice. At the dawn of creation, God gifted humanity with freedom—the ability to make choices, the privilege of self-determination, the skill of reasoning, the responsibility of stewardship, and even, amazingly, the possibility of disobedience. God so designed the world in love and for love, without coercion. And that is what the rigid right-to-lifers seem to have forgotten. Human

life *is* sacred, and partly because human beings are free to choose: to weigh relative goods or lesser evils; to make decisions based on a wide array of information sources; to use our God-given intellect in pursuit of a good life for all people. We have made and will make wrong choices. We don't always see that our self-interest is inextricably linked to the common good. We need the force of law and government to ensure that every citizen has a reasonable shot at the common good. But preserving freedom of choice is part of what makes the social contract in a democratic society compelling and effective. Regarding end-of-life issues, I believe this means allowing individuals and families to make decisions based on their particular circumstance.

Two recent deaths that captured the world's attention illustrate how this might work in very different contexts. In Terry Schiavo's case, her health condition eliminated the possibility of self-determination. The persistent vegetative state in which she existed could only be mercifully concluded by court decision, which ultimately was challenged by lawmakers and elected officials. How much more dignified her death could have been had her husband's decision to discontinue artificial nutrition been allowed when first requested some years ago. The same month Terry Schiavo was permitted to die, Pope John Paul II also died. But the proximity of their deaths was about all they had in common. Despite the rigidly pro-life stance of the Roman Catholic Church, the aged and ailing pontiff did exercise a measure of self-determination. Following numerous hospitalizations, it was as if he arrived at a certain peace about his life and death. Refusing further medical treatment, he returned to the Vatican and then to his Maker, born into heaven with the prayers and presence of the faithful from around the world. Against such an end there should no law.

We don't do a good job of helping people die, is the way one Fairmount doctor put it. According to the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, fewer than 20% of Americans currently have end-of-life directives, including living wills. Yet

research and practice show that people who have prepared these documents are able to exert greater control over their care and circumstance even if they lose their ability to communicate. I deeply respect the ministry of Hospice which offers the leading edge end-of life care, caregiver support, and bereavement services. The Hospice movement has been a bright light illuminating dark corners of fear, loneliness, and political controversy. Recently, the Hospice of the Western Reserve urged citizens to support a US Senate bill to improve increase awareness about advance care planning and to improve access to individuals advance directives. Your church has a commitment to stand with you and your family, to initiate end-of-life discussions, and to be there with you and for you in sickness and in health, as long as you are alive.

Let me ask you: have you ever said to a friend or family member, “If I ever get like that, please pull the plug.” Now let me ask you: have you prepared documents that reflect your wishes? Friends, here is the first step towards living well: talking about dying well with your loved ones. And then taking that next step to getting it down in writing. Last year, a number of Fairmounters produced a guide to assist us. [SHOW “THE JOURNEY AHEAD”] The booklet asks questions that help you think about your core values and what you want at the end of your earthly life. It provides space for important information that will be useful to family members following your death, including practical things such as your computer password. I remember discussing the title of the guide with the committee that prepared it. Someone had suggested “Journey’s End” and I’ll never forget the response of one of our elders who said: “But that’s not right! Death is *not* our journey’s end. It’s a transition into a whole new part of our life.” That’s how the guide got its title: The Journey Ahead.

It’s funny. I don’t hear much about the promises of Christian faith from those who would preserve biological life at any cost. Yet I know in my bones that there are some kinds of existence that are worse than death. Christian faith teaches that death is the end of our earthly life, but not the end of us. The

goodness of creation, and the flawed choices that creation has made in freedom are redeemed in God's love and grace embodied in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, I came that you might have life and have it abundantly. The Greek New Testament language has two words for life—"bios" which refers to the biological aspect of life; breathing and heartbeat and physical existence, and "zoe" which means a particular quality of life beyond the merely physical; a spiritual dimension of life that is not destroyed by death. This is the word Jesus used to describe his mission: that people would experience fullness of spiritual life and relationship, here and now, and for all eternity. A central tenet of our faith is the promise of resurrection, of dying and being raised to new life. I know it's hard for many of us to imagine what kind of life that will be. But we can trust the One who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death, and helps us pass into the life everlasting.

WHERE, O DEATH, IS YOUR VICTORY? WHERE, O DEATH, IS YOUR STING? THE STING OF DEATH IS SIN, AND THE POWER OF SIN IS THE LAW. BUT THANKS BE TO GOD, WHO GIVES US THE VICTORY THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.

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