Remembering As A Community

July 11, 2010

David P. Conrad

Welcome.

Welcome to our hour of worship.

Our service this morning is the middle of a three-part series planned by Sara Fretz-Goering and the worship committee to help each of us begin to think about and prepare for our deaths:

- What we might want included in a funeral or memorial service,
- How we might want our remains handled,
- And if and where we might want a memorial placed.

The idea to do this was sparked in part by a fascinating conversation between several of our members at last year's fall retreat at Shepherd Spring.

The series began with the worship service this past Memorial Day that included a sermon by Gene Miller on the Communion of Saints pointing out, among other things, that we do not live our lives in isolation, but rather in unity with those who have gone before-a Communion of Saints:

- Saints who are friends,
- Saints who are family,
- Saints who are fellow travelers in the Faith –the great Cloud of Witnesses.

Gene's sermon is posted on line — it will reward a rereading.

Today our service includes several of our community sharing their personal experience of the death of someone close to them.

Later, in early fall, our focus will turn to how we as a faith community handle death.

The hymns and scriptures in today's service come from important moments in my family's history and those of others contributing to today's service, and also from the All Saints Day service we have been observing here at Hyattsville Mennonite Church for the last, almost 15 years now.

Welcome to this hour of worship.

Sara Fretz-Goering

Most of us live rather unremarkable lives. We live unremarkable lives – and yet, to the people we love and who love us, we are each remarkable. This morning, several of us will be sharing our experiences with losing a friend, a spouse, a family member, an acquaintance in death. Many of you have experienced the death of someone dear and know the emptying wasted feeling when grieving occurs. We do not wish to revisit that grief or depression, but rather to talk about the need for remembering after one dies, and the importance of thinking and even planning for the event of death.

In the past 20 years, we have shared in the grieving and in the participation of services for members and friends of this congregation: Merle Brunk. Sylvia Clemmons. Peter Van Wingen. Burton Fretz. Bart Shapiro. Darlene Mann. Delton Franz. Marian Franz. Sally White. Nelson Good. Beth Foster.

Through each memorial service we honored each one's individuality and life. We continue to tell stories about them from time to time and we do laugh about humorous things

we remember. But we do not have *one place* where we go to think about them; we do not have the old church cemetery out back. We do not have a memorial garden or a columbarium for ashes. Truthfully, we have not been together long enough as a community to even have living traditions around what a service should be.

I've lost several members of my family to death, but I am sharing specifically about my brother. Burt, received a diagnosis of acute mylogneous leukemia in mid-October of 2000 and passed away less than six months later on April 5, 2001. It was a disease we believed he could beat — despite the rather dismal statistics from searches on the internet. One of Burt's closest friends had the same cancer and had been in remission for several years. We were all optimistic and hopeful until March when Burt was readmitted to the hospital for complications and not allowed to return home. On my drive home from the hospital one day, the reality suddenly hit me. Burt was going to die. He would not be around at any future family gatherings. He would no longer be *here*. I would have to call my brothers in other parts of the country to get them here quickly to say their good-byes. I would have to call my elderly parents and tell them their oldest son was not just seriously ill, but dying. This moment of truth was the letting go of hope. I share this because this emotional feeling of dread — this heavy weight of a psychological reality — is probably what held us all back from talking with Burt about dying, or his wishes after death. It is the catch 22 — family members do not want to bring up such topics because it might signal a lack of hope to the patient, and likewise, the patient doesn't bring it up to stifle hopes for the family. His wife, Anne, their two grown children, Rachel and Nathan, Peter and I all took turns the last three weeks sitting by his bedside since it was not medically possible for him to go home. In the last week, he went into unresponsive coma, and it became a gathering place for all of us to just be with him, sitting around his bed sharing

stories. We were able to be there when he took his last breath. It was a time when I felt God was also in that space.

What prompts me to think about memorial services is that we — our family — did the best we could with how we knew Burt. Five close friends of his spoke (including Larry Smucker) and also two ministers — Mel Schmidt from Hyattsville and the pastor from Cedar Lane Unitarian church — where the service was held. Cindy and Lauren sang “Blowing in the Wind” since Rachel and Nathan remembered hearing the song repeatedly on family car trips. Eric played several Bach fugues. We sang the hymns in four-part harmony, which Burt appreciated from our Mennonite tradition. “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” This one still chokes me up. We did the best we could, but it still would have felt good to have Burt have some say in the matter. We decided to scatter some of Burt’s ashes from a mountain in Maine that he loved to hike; Anne recently buried the other ashes in a cemetery in Northampton, Mass., where there is a plaque for both Burt and herself. We did the best we could, but…is this what he would have wanted? Mel Schmidt has frequently said that funerals/memorial services are for the living, not the dead, and yet meaning comes from the interaction of the dead with the living.

Who of us has not said at some point “Oh, I’d like that song played at my funeral”? A few weeks ago, Peter asked why I was talking about this topic. I asked “Would you know what I’d like shared at my memorial service?” He said, “Yeah, something from that female singer — what’s her name?” Yes, my point exactly. Likewise, I know one jazz tune that he has requested over and over. “Round Midnight.” Or is it “Song From my Father?” See? It is important to write these things down.

Another friend recently told me about her aunt who, before she died, said she didn't want any fuss made at her funeral, but she would like red carnations there. Imagine red carnations — *flowers* — playing such a memorable, meaningful part in a service!

As you listen to the others share this morning, I hope you might reflect on how you have been affected by the memories of friends and family you have lost in death. How do you continue to hold them up and remember them? What might you like to have shared at your memorial service? It does mean a great deal to those we leave behind.

Betty Good-White

We are told in the book of Joshua that when the Children of Israel crossed the Jordan River into Canaan, they built a memorial to help them remember.

The whole Hebrew nation was able to cross on dry land because when the feet of the priests carrying the ark of the Lord first touched the water, the river — in flood stage at the time — stood up in a single heap on one side.

Before the priests moved from where they stood, and the water resumed its flowing, the LORD said to Joshua: "Select 12 men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, 'Take 12 stones from out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.' "

With these stones Joshua built a memorial so that "When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them."

Hundreds of years later, on the occasion of his last meal with his beloved friends and disciples, the night Jesus was arrested and eventually killed, he instituted what has become for

Christians over the millenniums, around the world, and here in this small fellowship, a ritual for remembering. Of the bread and cup, Jesus said, “This do in remembrance of me.”

And so we are invited to be intentional about remembering.

So how do I go about my remembering? My brother Chet Wenger who died in November 2001 of chronic mylogenous leukemia, my father-in-law Ira Good, who died the same month, my mother-in-law who died in March 2005? My companion of 37 years, Nelson Good, who died four months after his mother on July 13, 2005?

Nelson was diagnosed in January 2005 with Adrenal Cortical Cancer, already in Stage IV with metastases in his lung, liver and bones. While we pursued radiation and chemotherapy, it seemed unlikely that he would survive. I am very grateful that he and I had the six and a half months we did to prepare for our parting, and during this time we also discussed some of the ways we might remember him. our young adult children, too, were included in these conversations.

We decided that Nelson would be cremated, but I wanted a viewing. With so many young children in House Church, I wanted them to be able to see the tangible evidence that the Nelson they knew so well was no longer in his still and cold body. Perhaps I wanted it for myself as well, and indeed, I kissed him one last time before the casket’s final closing.

Deborah, on the other hand, did not want her last memory of her father to be of him lying in a casket, and so we worked to protect her from seeing her father’s body thus, even when we gathered as a family for a final moment before the funeral.

Nelson would have been happy to have his cremains placed at Rolling Ridge, but I was not so inclined, and he deferred to my wishes. So one week after Nelson's funeral, we buried his ashes in a lovely wooden box from Ten Thousand Villages in a burial plot in Mellinger Mennonite Church in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. A grave stone marks the spot and on the same stone is my name and date of birth.

Some folks return again and again to the site of their loved one's remains. It has not been so with me. I tend to remember more as I move forward with living.

I hear Nelson's comments and reflections echo in my mind and I tend to view situations as I think he would, right along side my somewhat different perspective.

At first, I remembered Nelson by writing "Dear Nelson" letters which gradually two years later turned into "Dear Nelson about Don" letters and eventually to "Dear Don" and "Dear Don about Nelson" letters.

Sometimes I feel like I'll sob out loud, as when I listened to a group sing "Far Side Banks of Jordan" a year ago. The refrain is words from someone who has gone on before:

I'll be waiting on the far side banks of Jordan,
I'll be waiting, drawing pictures in the sand;
And when I see you coming I will rise up with a shout,
And come running through the shallow waters, reaching for your hand.

Then there are the deja vu moments, like a few weeks ago when Don and I sat on a high point in Colorado watching night come on, and I remembered the night Nelson and I had sat on top of Old Rag in the Shenandoah National Park while night fell. These are remembering times.

. . . and I remember Sally. This spring I was weeding and digging in the beautiful flower beds that Sally planted behind the house that was Don and Sally's and is now Don and Betty's. At one point, I stood up abruptly and said out loud: "What am I doing here? This is Sally's space." And a flood of confusion and grief arose in me. Then just as quickly came the thought, "I hope I'm honoring Sally by working here." And I stooped to be with the soil and plants again.

Before Nelson died, another discussion we had was, would I marry again. We agreed that were I to marry again, I would be honoring Nelson because I would be making a statement that marriage had been a good thing for me.

By honoring those who have gone on before, I believe we affirm our faith that there is indeed life after death, that we are mortal, but we are also immortal, and I believe that fundamentally it is immortality that gives value to each of our lives and the lives of those we love. Madeleine L'Engle quotes a Russian priest, Father Anthony, as saying, "To say to anyone 'I love you' is tantamount to saying 'You shall live forever.'"

Jesus said: "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to *eternal* life." (John 4:14 NRSV)

In his words, in his life and resurrection, and by His Spirit, Jesus reveals so much to us about immortality, about breaking down the barriers that exist between mortality and immortality.

For me, the process of remembering is part of being mortal, but, at the same time, loving and remembering opens us to what is beyond the veil. It opens us to what is immortal. It lifts us to the Transcendent.

Donald White

How do we remember our loved ones? By how their lives have influenced others, by what they have said and by memorial services and markers. I would like to share with you some thoughts about Sally White, my beloved first wife, her life, her approach to death and how we can remember her.

Sally and I were Goshen College classmates and were married in 1960, a year after graduating. In 1971, we moved to Maryland, started coming to Hyattsville Mennonite Church and became very active in the life of the congregation. We both took a turn as chairperson and Sally was the first woman to hold that position. She loved music — directed musicals, children's choirs and bell choirs at the church. She gave piano lessons for 45 years in our home and at one time had 52 students [1992-93]. The legacy of her love of music lives on in her students, in her children and in her grandchildren.

Sally died in 2006, after a year-and-a-half battle with advanced breast cancer. During that time, when she could, she read voraciously — I would guess some 50 books, many of which were on spirituality and the writings of early saints and mystics. I think she was establishing a connection with those who had gone before. At some point, after extensive surgery and limited success of treatments with hormones and chemotherapy, she knew she was going to die and began preparing herself for that event. She read books about death and dying and even kept a journal for awhile.

One way to remember her is by her own words. I would like to read three excerpts from her journal — to share with you her thoughts and, in a few places, thoughts from her readings

— which may help us to reflect on our own mortality. In the second passage she interjects her immediate feelings of freedom, shakiness and fear.

Monday, August 29, 2005:

The last day of my 67th year. What a challenge this year has been. It began with a trip to the Southwest and, specifically, to Zion National Park. In the midst of fabulous beauty and a very comfortable lodge I struggled with incontinence and celebrated the success of hand surgeries. Little did I know that I was going to discover a life-threatening malignancy.

How do I approach a 'new year' tomorrow? Will it be a continuation of healing and beginning of new possibilities or will it be an ending? Can I prepare for both and do I have the courage to try?

Utne Reader, p. 48, Oct. '05 –

… "reconciling ourselves to death can open a window into our deepest nature and only by accepting death will we lead a truly fulfilling life."

"mortal salience" modern science-speak for moments of realization that death awaits us; makes us want to defend our views, bolster our self-esteem — anything to lull us into forgetting our fate.

Mystics have long considered how living with our mortality can liberate us.

Dan Liechty, theology & peace studies scholar & prof. at Ill. State U.,

Science & Spirit, 3-4/05

From death, anxiety & its contradictions "the most sublime, creative and spiritually uplifting aspects [of] our nature emerge. But, that's also where the most primitively reactive, paranoid and violent aspects of our nature emerge."

… fear of death, amplified by the media, creates panic — hardened absolutism, rigid politically, theologically.

Death [is] like an unmapped land — but on the perimeter we might find new spiritual depth as well as sheer terror — even learn to live with this tension.

If, as Paul Peachey often says, "Intelligence is [the] ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind", maybe we can do the same with considering life and death, and live more honestly."

Thursday, October 6, 2005, 4 AM

Dark Night of the Soul, Gerald May, pp 149-151

"Maybe some — perhaps many — of the troubles we experience collectively are really manifestations of a communal dark night of the soul. If so, then some of the turmoil we experience (in the church at Hyattsville) might not be due to something gone terribly wrong. It may be a sign of something going exquisitely right, of divine action carrying us through spaces where we would not and could not go on our own, toward a place of greater freedom and love."

Can never know for sure — but signs are

1. powerless to anything about it
2. lack of deep down motivation to return to old ways
3. deep heart-felt desire within group to remain alone in loving awareness of God — in interior peace and stillness without the acts and exercises.

“When people long for sheer love and bare compassion, when they yearn for simplicity of being and naturalness of peace, when they die inside from the simple desire for liberty and justice that they may become manifest in their relationship, in the groups they form — third and surest sign

… glimpse of incredible hope … all we can do is hope for the dawn.

Psalms translates Lord to Beloved. My experiences with fighting for my life [this] past year transformed my understanding of love — love for God and for one another.

(1) Just can’t do it anymore — as before illness.
(2) Don’t really want to return to what I was or had. “Just want to be with God — be in love with God … faculties are emptied, sensitized and reliance on God is deepened.”
(3) “Desire — simple desire to love God — to remain alone in loving attentiveness to God … in inward peace, quietness and rest without any (some) of the normal “acts and exercises” associated with meditation and “without any particular understanding or comprehension.

[Gerald May], pp 161

“dark night of recovery from life-threatening illness”

“dependence on God is the only way [of] life”

“need to stay alive” source of grace “only hope for survival”

At some point, perhaps in May and again in October, [I felt] the desperate need for God and moved toward a loving desire for God … as if God was (is) saying ‘I want to be your deepest love.’ (For me [this] translated into love for family and church.) … freedom. Before, needed God for recovery; now need developing into a love for God as God’s self. Shakiness

— recovery no longer is the most important thing in life — fear. God was a means to an end — recovery. Now recovery is no longer the end, but only a means in the service of love. [My] deepest desire is no longer for recovery, but for God alone. Freedom to love God and neighbors (family) more completely.

Saturday night, November 26, 2005:

"Advent is only one hour away. A new year and new hope — come Lord Jesus. Watch and pray. Is the night past? The day of salvation, the great season of Advent! Observe with faith and love, with praise and thanksgiving, with healing."

Finally, she quotes from T. S. Elliot:

"Love is most nearly itself

When here and now cease to matter."

And then, "In my end is my beginning." (End of journal entries.)

How do we as a congregation remember our loved ones who have died? We do have a special service once a year for that purpose. But, we have no cemetery like our country congregations have. So, what are the alternatives? Sally expressed a desire to have her ashes buried at Rolling Ridge Study Retreat, where our congregation is a partner member. My family is working with a group of friends to develop a memorial space there and we hope to be able to do that soon. I think it would also be valuable if we could provide a permanent place in our church building for remembering members of our congregation who have died — perhaps designate a wall where commemorative plaques could be mounted.

So, we remember our loved ones by how their lives have influenced others, by what they have said and by memorial services and markers.

I would like to close with a passage from Psalm 116,

“A Hymn of Thanksgiving”.

“What shall I render to the Lord

for all his bounty to me?

I will lift up the cup of salvation

and call upon the name of the Lord,

I will pay my vows to the Lord

in the presence of all his people.

Precious in the sight of the Lord

is the death of his saints.

. . .

Praise the Lord!” Amen.

Karen Lehman

A couple of weeks ago I was completing a contract for a resident that moved into our retirement community. There’s a section in the contract that says “Friends House strongly encourages residents to have funeral and burial plans.” When I reviewed this section of the contract, Bob looked at me and with a sheepish expression on his face and said that he guesses he doesn’t want to think about dying so he hasn’t put any plans together yet. Bob and his wife are both in their 80s.

We often assume that as we age, we are getting closer to dying, we should think more about our death and plan for it. Clearly, this is not so. But why should an 80-year-old be more prepared for death than someone much younger? How many of us know how close or how far our death will be? Not planning for my death at 51 doesn't mean that I will think about planning for it at 80. Unless I have a life-altering event, chances are greater that I won't.

Only because I've had personal life experiences with death; in my work with older adults, a resident's suicide, my father's death and have been witness to the many ways that give or don't give opportunity to the ritual of death and the allowance of grieving, do I come to this firm belief that I hold — death is a holy experience, one to give deep thought and preparation for, and needs to be given the great consideration that it is due.

In training staff to give care to our residents with dementia and Alzheimer's, we teach them that the progression in the decline is the same as the birth cycle. Why should the approach and preparation for death not be considered in the same way, as part of our cycle of life? In birth we consider and prepare for so many things. Our families are often intimately involved. The experience is blessed event.

To think about and consider our death feels self-centered and for those of us that do everything we can not to appear too egotistical, thinking about oneself in this way may not feel comfortable. When I put myself front and center and consider how sad the world will be without me, I want to minimize that and say I'm not that important and really, what did I do in my life anyway? This is maybe my Amish/Mennonite background coming out!

The fact is, our death is going to be a big event. We live in community. Our families and friends will need and want to grieve their loss. The ceremony of saying good-bye is very important.

It wasn't until much later in my life that I really came to appreciate the traditions that were part of my family's cultural experience. In my father's death, there were many ways that we had active participation in his dying and his funeral and burial, which is all part of the ritual of letting go. We gave time for several days for family and friends to visit and view his body. Friends brought us food and cared for us. His brothers dug his grave. We took turns shoveling the dirt until he was fully buried.

In contrast, most of the residents who have died at Friends House, have a memorial service sometimes weeks or months after the death. There is nothing that happens after the death to give consideration or to honor the person that passed. My director of maintenance died on a Sunday in late January. Everyone was at work the next day, Monday, as though nothing significant had happened. I was out of town and it wasn't until I came back to the community that I found many of the people that had worked with Jim for the last 25 years in a kind of emotional vise. They didn't have a way of expressing their grief — they hadn't been given permission to stop, to express their feelings and to think about him and our loss. There was a memorial service three weeks later, but by that time, it felt a little past the actual death event. I find this custom to have a missing step in giving a way to honor death after it occurs, to stop my normal routine for just a little while, to acknowledge and to grieve after the event has taken place. Life isn't going to on as normal, someone that was important, a person that was among us, has died.

As you may be able to tell, I have a lot of feelings and opinions about death, the planning for, the emotional preparation, the traditions and rituals associated with how we transition from life. I hope that I what I said today gives you a little nudge to consider your own death. It may not feel natural to think along these lines, but I suggest that the process can lead one on a spiritual journey.