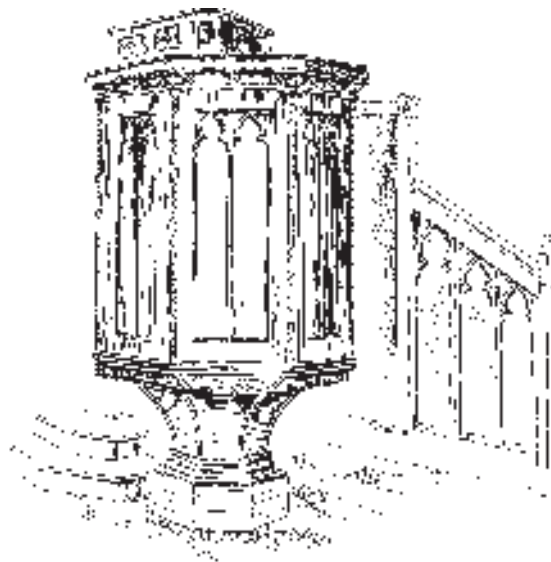


February 15, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Struggling with the Carlson Deaths by The Reverend George H. McConnel

Romans 14:5-9

When I was in second grade, Punchy, our dog, my life-long friend, was put to sleep. He had gotten old, developed arthritis, and could no longer control his bladder. Even I, at eight-years-old, sensed that he couldn't play the way he used to and that he was in pain. Unknown to me, my parents had taken three trips to the Vets office to put him to sleep, but couldn't get out of the car. Finally, when on the brink of our moving to a new house, my mother put her foot down. One set of rugs was enough! And so they called Dr. Haines before they left the house that time and he met them in the parking lot. As hard as it was, I'm sure that was the right thing to do. As the movie title exclaimed several years ago, "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?"

For humans we call it euthanasia or mercy killing. The word "euthanasia" is from the Greek meaning literally "a good death" and refers to the inducement of death, especially the putting to death of incurable or terminally ill patients painlessly and at their request. The word "euthanasia" isn't found in the Bible. Although illegal in most countries, euthanasia received sanction as morally permissible from both Socrates and Plato. During the 20th Century, efforts to change government policies on euthanasia met limited success in Western countries.

Still, in this age of modern medicine and its technological marvels, we have drawn a distinction between active and inactive euthanasia. Inactive euthanasia involves not going to extraordinary means in order to prolong a life.

Many of us have signed a “living will” and put it in the Church Office stating that we “be allowed to die and not be kept alive by artificial means and heroic measures.” That document goes on to say: “I believe that death is as much a reality as birth, growth, maturity and old age. As a Christian I affirm life; yet I claim the promise of Christ that the same God who meets me in life will meet me in death. For that reason, I do not endorse the hopeless and often frantic continuation of ‘life’ beyond that point, where there is no reasonable expectation of recovery.”

I believe in that living will and have signed it myself. As young parents, Jill and I lived it out when we refused to sign permission for an operation for our infant son, Phillip. After three operations and no assurance that a fourth would help him, we called it quits. Two weeks later an autopsy revealed that he most likely would not have survived the fourth operation, but we didn’t know that when we made our heart-wrenching decision.

Active euthanasia, however, is a different story. It has been historically rejected in traditional, Judeo-Christian belief. Our Phillip, for instance, was still hooked up to an IV those last days and lived in an oxygen tent. While we didn’t go to the fourth operation, we didn’t starve him to death either. Is that too fine a line of distinction?

Back in the '80s when our children, Jamie and Erin, were still in school, we had a wonderful spring vacation in Florida. We were on the last lap of a two-day marathon drive back to Jamestown, NY when we heard the news. Coming over the Chautauqua Lake Bridge someone in the car turned the radio dial to a Jamestown station. A familiar newscaster said, “Mr. and Mrs. J. Ralph Carlson were found dead in their home on Front Street.” The vacation was over.

My first thought, since we had broken in halfway through the news blurb, was that there must have been a fire. But, when we reached home there were notes taped to our door. Our Associate Pastor indicated that the initial thinking was murder—suicide. Official Investigations came to the same conclusion.

There was no evidence of struggle, but the police think J. Ralph suffocated his wife with a pillow and then killed himself with carbon monoxide. He left a long letter to his children telling them his plan. Now they were both dead—dead on their 50th wedding anniversary and his 74th birthday. They had made a pact, the letter said. In keeping with J. Ralph’s meticulous nature, the will, the insurance papers, the checking account, the savings certificate and the other pertinent documents were spread out on the dining room table. It was obvious that a lot of thought had gone into this.

In his wife, Rhea’s gentle and quiet way, and in J. Ralph’s poetic and gregarious way, they always seemed to understand us. Now, in our turn, we were called on to understand them.

In the end, that’s all that any human being asks of any other: to love, to be loved, and to be respected for living life as one sees fit to live it. Just as they gave so much to so many of us in the Jamestown congregation, now we tried to give back to them some measure of care, understanding and concern. We prayed that we would let nothing overshadow the beauty and goodness of all that went before—that we would not let the manner of their death deny the dignity of their life, or the faith and humility of their spirit.

Rhea, who grew up living on a farm, was especially close to nature—at one with the scheme of the universe and its everlasting births and rebirths. J. Ralph caught that from her and talked about it often

in his radio commentaries. He was a Jamestown radio personality. They both knew the ebb and flow of things. They knew that to find the unfolding perfection of eternal life, we must first cross the river of death. And when we cross the river, the Bible says, "God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, and neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." God has planted eternity in the human heart, and anyone who has worked in the garden and planted in the soil knows that His promise will turn into a marvelous and perfect life.

And so it is that some of us look forward to that new life. Some are not afraid of it, but rather embrace it and let go of the cares and values of this world and rush ahead to meet the new day. Some of us wait our turn. Others hasten to greet the dawn. In a strange sense, if you look at it one way, perhaps there was no closer moment of communion between Rhea and J. Ralph and their God than that final, fragile moment when they chose to sever ties with this life and hold only and forever more to God. Certainly, they did not mean us harm at the last. They did not want to hurt us. I suspect our grief was the only regret that troubled them.

At the Session meeting the week after the incident one of our elders asked if we as a church had been near them in Rhea's illness. We had—especially since the winter before when Rhea's Alzheimer's intensified. Our parish caller had spent a long time with J. Ralph on his last Thursday, the day the doctors told him Rhea would need nursing home care—the day they said she couldn't stay at home any longer. J. Ralph took that news hard. Perhaps he knew then what they had agreed for him to do when the time came...and now the time had come. Would he have the courage to go through with it? The day before they died one of our members took them the flowers from our Sunday worship service. And another member, who works at the hospital visited with them on her lunch hour.

So many in the church cared for them, but the thought still lingered, "What if I had said the right word?" They, I think, would not have wanted us to have such thoughts, to feel guilty or to think to ourselves, "If only I had done this," or "Why didn't I do something more?" When someone has made the ultimate decision about this earthly shell, it is not possible for anyone to change it. There was nothing else anyone could have done. We cannot spend the rest of our lives in remorse or guilt. There is no reason for either. They would not have it so.

Still, we, as a community of faith, did struggle to make sense of this event, and this morning I invite you to as well. Not in a judgmental way, I hope, for judgment belongs to God and not to us. But many of us have asked hard questions. I know I have. In the same circumstances, what would I have done? There's no cure for Alzheimer's, nothing to look forward to but the life of the incontinent, losing all dignity and self-expression and thought. Is that really living?

Yet, the Book of Job tells us that God is the creator and sovereign of all creation, who alone has authority to give and take away life. The Sixth Commandment and the Torah regulations against the shedding of human blood undoubtedly influence a negative Judeo-Christian response to active euthanasia. Paul's writings such as the passage we read from Romans, "None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself," and his own preventing of a suicide in the Book of Acts infers a similar attitude.

Catholic teaching condemns euthanasia as a "crime against life." Protestants differ among themselves—especially since the advent of physician-assisted death and Dr. Kevorkian. Proponents of euthanasia emphasize that choice is a fundamental principle for liberal democracies and free market systems. They point out that the pain and suffering a person feels during a disease, even with pain relievers, can be incomprehensible to a person who has not gone through it. Even without considering the physical pain, it is often difficult for patients to overcome the emotional pain of losing their independence.

On the other hand, voluntary euthanasia has often been rejected as a violation of the sanctity of human life. Specifically, some Christians argue that human life ultimately belongs to God, so that humans should not be the ones to make the choice to end life. Critics also argue that voluntary euthanasia could unduly compromise the professional roles of health care employees, especially doctors.

I remember in my first year at seminary that a famous ethics professor at Princeton University and his wife took their lives. I don't remember their exact circumstances. Like the Carlsons, they were in their 70s and their health prospects were bleak. The Princeton couple had sent a letter to the *New York Times*, which explained their motivation. It answered a lot of questions, but like the Carlson deaths, a lot were left unanswered. Like, what does that kind of event say about aging in our society? Is life over when we can no longer write a book like the ethics professor or when we no longer can help others on the radio like J. Ralph had done for so many years? Is death better than sending our spouse to a nursing home? Our culture's emphasis seems to be focused on the young, on achievement, and on activity of all kinds. What value do we place on the aging?

In his final letter to his children, J. Ralph said that what was left of his estate would be better spent on college education for his grandchildren than on caring for their mother who would soon be no more than a vegetable.

He was right about the cost of nursing home care. One of the doctors in the Jamestown congregation shared with me an article, which indicated that one-percent of our GNP in America is spent on dying in the last weeks of life. Twenty-five years later I bet that expense has grown. Dying is becoming extremely expensive. But, what a decision—feeling you have to choose between nursing home care and college for your offspring. That really bothers me. I am the last one to disparage a college education, but isn't a moral education equally or even more important? Don't we learn more from our family in the courageous, persevering way we handle life's difficulties, than we do in Economics 101?

In the end, no matter what anyone says, we are still left to struggle with questions like these and answer them as we see fit—those persisting questions: "What is life?" "Why do people suffer?" "What is death?" "What really matters?"

Persisting questions? Yes. But for the Christian, also the persisting promise of Christ, "In this world you will have tribulation; be not afraid, I have overcome the world."

Let us pray –

O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in Thy mercy grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.