

The Pain of A Death With Dignity

Exodus 20:12  
Deuteronomy 30: 19-20  
Mark 14:32-36  
1 Corinthian 15:51-58

Larry I. Palmer

Sage Chapel  
Cornell University  
April 13, 1986

COPYRIGHT LARRY I. PALMER

Late last June, shortly after Bob Johnson asked me to preach a sermon here at Sage Chapel, I received a telephone call that I had intellectually expected for several years, but nevertheless broke my heart. The telephone rang early one Saturday morning and I heard the voice of my oldest brother, a voice that has always calmed and comforted me by its warmth and strength. His words, carefully and lovingly chosen so as not to cause undue alarm in me, his much younger brother, will remain etched in my mind forever:

"Larry, your mother--[pause] Mom, has been in the hospital for the last few days. The doctors say she has some malignancy in her body, but they are not sure how extensive the cancer is. They will be doing more tests today, but the prognosis is very poor...."

Perhaps in response to his soothing calmness, I asked some questions, more technical than fundamental in their line of inquiry, and promised to call him later that day for the results of the tests. He reminded me that my mother--our mother--was 82 years old and that we must accept that her life was in God's hands. I hung up the phone and turned to my wife's waiting arms and burst into tears.

After I regained some of my composure and recalled why I knew the phone call of impending death was coming--my mother had looked feeble the previous summer, she had even written me six months before any diagnosis of cancer, but simply with the feelings of old age, that she hoped, she would live until I returned from England--I decided to call my mother. A few weeks before I learned of her cancer I had told Mother that I was coming to visit her and bringing my eldest son in July. This time when I dialed my heart was filled with impending doom and my mind was racing repeatedly over the words "my mother is dying of terminal cancer." After I heard my mother's fearless voice talk about her premonitions over the past two years that she had cancer despite repeated assurances from her well trained doctors that she did not and the fact that she did not have long to live, my feelings began to change. Listening to my mother talk and to the aching and longing in my own heart, I realized that Mother was very much alive, not only in her own mind, but in my heart. I suddenly realized that my mother was not "dying of terminal cancer" as we are instructed to believe by our scientific and secular culture, but that she was "living with terminal cancer."

That change in the way in which I conceived my mother's condition last June gave me the courage to call Bob Johnson back and accept his invitation to speak to you on this date on this topic without any certainty as to whether my mother would be alive today. There were some things that I did know last June that led me to this topic: "The Pain of a Death with Dignity." I knew that my mother's death would be on my mind and heart at this

time for a general and specific reason. Regardless of when my mother died my own professional reading and my observation of others indicated to me that the grieving process following the death of a parent is at least a year-long process. In an emotional sense, death for the survivors is always a long process. More specifically, had my mother still been alive she would have been 83 years old just last week and I knew that her life and its meaning to my life, and perhaps all of life, would be on my mind and heart in this post-Easter season, the season of Resurrection and triumph over death for Christians.

Rather than talk about one of the many ethical and legal issues concerning death that is confronting our society, I want to share with you this morning some of my thoughts on our fear of the "pain" of death, our own and those of our loved ones. I want to bring to you a personal perspective of faith that sees death not as the ultimate and final answer to the meaning of life, but sees the meaning of life in human love and connections. I want to talk to you about death in the context of the long and, yes, painful--at least for me--death of my mother from one of the most dreaded diseases--cancer.

The ultimate attitude of Christians towards death is that it is a mystery and an unknowable experience that we must face with love, with as much of a sense of human connection as we are able to muster in the face of the pain of the death of a loved one. My talk this morning is a story of a journey--literal trips to the bedside and grave of my mother over the past few months. At the same time it is the story of a spiritual journey toward the mysterious grace that emerges at unexpected times and in unknown ways in our human effort to care despite the pain of death.

#### I.

Over the next few hours after that phone call from my brother, the prognosis became clearer and more gloomy. Despite my mother's routine screening for cancer the previous January, it was clear that many of her major organs--her colon, her lungs, her lymph nodes--had cancerous cells in them. She needed an operation that provided no prospect of cure, but which might enable her to eat sufficiently to leave the hospital, at least for a time. Unlike many people, I must confess that I did not decide to immediately rush to my mother's bedside. I rationalized that decision on many grounds--that I was essentially at peace with my mother, that I dislike what I call "death visits," particularly to people suffering from cancer; my mother and I had agreed that I should visit her after her operation, etc.

Although my mother had reassured me that she was confident about the operation and she very much wanted me to keep my plans to visit two weeks after her scheduled operation, something happened that opened my heart to a larger dimension of death than

simply the supposed physical pain of major surgery and probable death from cancer. What changed my mind about making a trip was the insight that my connection to my mother was not, and should not be the only consideration in the face of her life-threatening illness. The faithful belief that we are here to choose life made me aware that my siblings' need for my presence during my mother's operation was just as important, in many senses, more important, than any private peace I may have made with my mother about a visit. For it was the sense of pain and abandonment in my oldest sister's voice--a woman who had changed my diapers and listened to my adolescent dreams--that made me realize that my visit was called for immediately during this moment of crisis.

In the face of an impending death, we must remember that it is not simply our singular connection to a person who is dying that is important but our interconnectedness to other humans beings that must be honored and recognized. Thus in my own mind, my sister's need for my presence was just as important as my mother's need. For my sister in a different, but equally authentic and painful way was coping with the idea of losing her mother. Since she provided immediate care and comfort to my mother because of her physical and emotional proximity to her, my ability to provide some comfort to my sister was in fact caring for my mother in an important way. We must remember that Jesus gathered all of his disciples in Gethsemane as his foreordained death was about to happen. Although I would not be called upon to play a primary decision-making role during or following my mother's operation, my sister would be and she needed my support.

When we respond to that call for love, for a sense of connection, it seems to me we so often receive unexpected gifts as evidence of the power of God's love to create human bonds and thus of his Grace. So it was when I made the first trip to St. Louis to be with my mother and my family at the time of her operation. Not only did I get a chance to see and talk to many of my relatives and my mother's friends whom I had not seen for years, but I was also able to be present at a devotional service that my mother asked the minister of her church to lead a few hours before her operation.

Let me describe to you that particular human family represented in my mother's hospital room at the devotional service.

My two oldest siblings--my sister and brother--were there representing the oldest of my mother's ten children. My sister's eldest son and one of my nieces, the daughter of one of my older brothers, were also present. My mother's first cousin, a woman also in her eighties who had grown up with my mother, who had just arrived the night before, had joined us. And me, my mother's next to youngest son and her ninth child. When we all joined hands with each other and my mother as the minister star-

ted to read from the 46th Psalm -- "God is our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble...."-- ,I felt my heart swell with tears of thanksgiving to God for allowing me the privilege of being a part of that human family, for allowing me to share with others the journey of life, that must necessarily end in death for me as it would for my mother.

So in that very sad and risky moment where our eighty-two-year-old loved one was facing an operation, not to cure the disease and remove the immediate threat of death, but to offer some hope that she could return home, I was blessed with a sense of connection with human beings and thus with a sense of God's Grace that was beyond words and all my previous experience.

## II.

A few weeks later, I made another trip to St. Louis with my eldest son, who was only seven at the time, to visit my mother in her home. This was in many ways a very hard visit. The reality of what it meant to care for my mother in her debilitating state had started to sink in. The operation had not been as successful as the doctors had hoped; the cancer was far more extensive than they had anticipated and her doctors had wisely, in my opinion, declined to set any "time limit" as to how long she would live. With the immediate crisis of the operation passed, the hard human choices of care for others and care for the person whose life is known to be imperiled had to be made. My oldest brother and sister, my mother's primary daily companions before her illness and her primary caretakers as her health started to slip away, needed vacations and rest. How are their needs and the needs of those of us pursuing our careers and our own family's needs to be accommodated? How does one deal with one's feeling about the sibling who wants only to "do something" for my mother, but is unable or unwilling to see the importance of taking a turn spending a night with her in case she needs assistance in the middle of night?

There is also, of course, the confusion that surrounds illness: Did the nutritionist recommend the food that my mother was unable to hold, or did the person taking the message not hear what was said? Is one supposed to feel grief despite the fact it was a beautiful summer day without the usual suffocating humidity of St. Louis summers? What does one do with the feeling that my mother "looked bad," as if her former vitality and strength was simply slipping away from her?

## III.

I made another visit to see my mother in October. She had been hospitalized again for several weeks and after much agonizing among my brothers and sisters, she was being moved to a nursing home. My mother by this time had lost nearly forty

percent of her body weight and to almost any objective visitor she had the look of death about her. But to me she was my mother in that special spiritual sense of being connected to me through all time. I could see as she opened her eyes ever so slowly that she wanted to be kissed and held, which I did, as she managed to whisper ever so softly how glad she was to see me. She held out her hand and took and squeezed my hand tightly as if the opportunity to hold the hand of one of her children gave her strength. She said that the move that morning from the hospital to the nursing home had made her very tired and she had not been able to eat so I told her I would spend the next day with her after she got some rest. It was obvious that it was hard for my mother to talk or to eat or drink, but she was trying. It was also obvious that my siblings and I were in a great deal of emotional and spiritual pain because we assumed that she was in a great deal of physical pain.

I spent the entire afternoon with my mother the next day before catching a plane to return to Ithaca. During the course of that visit, I had some short and abbreviated conversations with her. She asked me if she was going to live until winter, or as she always put it "until the cold weather comes," not in an agonizing way but to check the information she had been given by others. I told her that I did not know and that nobody knew how long she would live. Such honest and frank acknowledgement of the uncertainty of death seemed to invigorate my mother. She asked to be helped into a chair to sit up for a while; she called in the nursing staff and introduced me to all of them; she introduced me to her roommates. She demonstrated her sense of modesty when she insisted that I leave her room when her bed had to be changed because she no longer had complete control of her bowels. In other words there were all the signs of a person trying to define herself in relation to others around her. As we discussed the details of her life in the nursing home in between dozing sleep--who was bringing the wheel chair, could there be modifications in her diet, would her strength increase so that she could participate in some of the programs--I gained a sense of hope. Perhaps, I thought, she will have another rebound as she had several times before and eat again and be able to wheel herself down the corridor. Perhaps she will be able to take the fall foliage trip scheduled for the nursing home residents in three weeks.

Within two weeks of my visit my mother died. There had been many decisions to make in the course of those two weeks as we all prepared ourselves for the inevitable. By talking and sharing our fears, our frustrations with each other, I believe we managed to avoid wishing for her death as a way of ending her suffering because we provided support and love for each other. We managed to see death not as the end of her dying, but as the end of her living. When I returned to St. Louis for the funeral with my wife, I noticed a certain coming together among my siblings, a



putting aside of our disappointments in each other just to help us all get through the event of a funeral and burial. We had each experienced my mother's death in our way. Some had been able to consult with her and her doctors over the months; others had been helpful with financial decisions; others had helped to find a nursing home once that painful decision had been reached; some had been unable to visit during her last few weeks in the nursing home because of their own fear; and others had simply sat for hours by her bedside and held her hand. All of us were made to feel extremely vulnerable and perhaps sometimes ambivalent as we saw the strength of our lives--our mother--waste away. We were also very human and thus failed, each in our own way, to provide everything my mother needed much as Peter, James, and John failed to provide the comfort Jesus needed. Yet I realized that we had all shared our love with my mother and she and God had responded to our imperfect, but very human efforts with love.

#### IV.

After the funeral service and burial, my wife and I made a very short journey--it was merely a few blocks from my mother's church--to visit one of my mother's friends, who was also my friend. She was a woman who had taught me religious instruction as a child and had become a good friend of my mother's over the past thirty-five years. I had talked often of this woman and had wanted my wife to meet her. We spent an hour or more with this absolutely saintly woman who expressed deep appreciation for our visit. In the ritual of the funeral, which is designed for the family's grieving, it seemed we had left out the grief of my mother's personal friends. She told us she was having a very hard time since my mother's death reminded her that most of her friends were now dead and she was wondering why she was still left on the earth. I told her she was left on the earth for me and my wife because she is a part of my life and thus of every life I will ever touch.

She also told me that she had spent a lot of time with my mother over the past few months, talking and praying, but she was impressed with the fact that my mother was not in pain. I told her that I had had that impression but I never discussed it with my brothers or sisters because we were always dealing with the pain of loss or the pain of caring. I told her that as far as I knew my mother did not take any pain killers until two days before she died. I mentioned that it seemed to me that my mother was extremely cheerful and stubborn throughout the whole process, because she had faith not in her doctors, but in God.

My mother's friend further told me that my mother had a hard time accepting death, she was a frisky lady, and was not going to take cancer lying down, as it were. I told her that my sister had once in exasperation said that if my mother could take all of us, meaning all of her children, with her, she would have died

months ago, a statement which made us laugh since it contained the kernel of truth: death for us is hard and painful because we know it means the loss of connections with those we love. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we want the comfort and presence of our loved ones even when the death is certain and fore-ordained.

She then talked about the friendship she had shared with my mother through the years and how hard it would be not to have that friend. I told her how important her friendship with my mother had been to her and to me. I said it is a wonderful sense of connection between mother and son when they share a friend like her.

We then recalled how beautiful and moving the young soloist's rendition of "Amazing Grace" had been at the service earlier in the day. My mother's friend smiled and stated that when she dies, she wanted a similarly wonderful rendition of "Amazing Grace" sung at her funeral.

We talked about my sense of commitment to my own children and how that commitment comes from the care she and my mother had given to me. I told her that I honor my mother by trying to live life according to the precept of love and caring. Our lives will be long to the degree we love others.

So in the hours after my mother's coffin was lowered mechanically into the ground, I shared a sense of her love and spirit--which is the source upon which faith is built--with a loving friend, of hers and mine. I realized my mother's death was the kind of death I desired, with loved ones and friends about me, doing the best they could, helping me to make all the difficult decisions about feeding tubes and any other medical intervention with loving care.

#### V.

After I returned to Ithaca, I went to the nursery and purchased a tree that my three young sons helped me plant in our front yard as a memorial to my mother. As we planted what is now called grandmother's tree, my middle son recalled that we had not planted a tree for our dog, Flinty, who had died two years before. We talked about graveyards and burying in the ground and sadness and fear of death on a beautiful fall day, as we dug.

This morning, in this post-Easter season, I want to close by sharing with you a note of sympathy that I received from a friend here in Ithaca. It speaks to the way we honor our sense of connection. It is a poem by Alice Walker, the author of *THE COLOR PURPLE*, included in her essay entitled "In Search of our Mother's Gardens." She writes:



This poem is not enough, but is something, for the woman who literally covered the holes in our walls with sunflowers:

They were women then  
My mama's generation  
Husky of voice--Stout of  
Step  
With fists as well as  
Hands  
How they battered down  
Doors  
And ironed  
Starched white  
Shirts  
How they led  
Armies  
Headragged Generals  
Across mined  
Fields  
Booby-trapped  
Kitchens  
To discover books  
Desks  
A place for us  
How they knew what we  
Must know  
Without knowing a page  
Of it  
Themselves.

She concludes after the poem: "Guided by my heritage of beauty and respect for strength--in search of my mother's garden, I found my own."

When we honor our mothers and all those caring people in our lives by thanking God for the "woman who literally covered the holes in our walls with sunflowers," we discover the beauty and sense of connectedness which is God's world for us. In so praising and thanking God in this season when we literally plant our gardens, we will realize that it is not a death with dignity that we seek, but a life of dignity, a life of love and a sense of connectedness. For dignity is something that we harvest at the end of a life filled with grace.

AMEN