

Year B, March 29, 2018
Maundy Thursday
Christ Church, Mexia

What would you do if you knew you only had a short time to live? Would you seek medical help, do everything possible to try to prevent the death?

When I was serving in Laos many years ago, there was a beautiful concrete monument not far from the American embassy compound in Vientiane. We called it the vertical runway because it had been built with the cement that our government had given to the country to extend the runways at their airport. But they decided that the monument was a priority. However, during its construction, one of the most revered soothsayers of that time predicted that when the monument was completed, the King would die. Not wanting that to happen, they completed the monument except for a relatively small area inside the passageways at the bottom. They didn't want to stop work, which could appear that the monument was complete, so a worker came each day and put tiles onto the unfinished area, but not enough to complete the monument. Then each night another worker came and took down the tiles that had been placed that day. And that process was to continue until the King died of natural causes. Now you may dismiss this story as the result of uneducated, unsophisticated people.

So, let me tell you one closer to home. Oliver Winchester married Sarah Pardee at the height of the American Civil War. Oliver was the man who invented the first repeating rifle, which greatly aided the Northern forces and later became a staple on the western frontier. Thus, Winchester amassed an incredible fortune. Some four years after marriage the couple was blessed with a baby girl, but she died when about two weeks old. Sarah was totally distraught, as you may imagine. A few years later, Oliver died of TB. The money she inherited couldn't overcome the grief of her losses. On the advice of a friend, Sarah sought guidance and solace from a spiritist. The medium, speaking on behalf of Oliver, told her that his invention had placed a curse on the family. Thousands had been killed by the rifles and their spirits were seeking vengeance. She was told to leave CT and move west. Oliver would guide her to the place where she was to build a home for all the distressed spirits; she was never to stop building or she too would die. She followed the instructions and for 36 years she oversaw continuous construction and demolition until she died in her sleep at 83 having spent almost the entire fortune. OK, don't take advice from a fortune cookie and, yes these are extreme stories, but don't people often try to prolong life by whatever means?

There are other options, however. The Rev. Anna Tew reminds us, "...we live in a world filled with death. We have all lost loved ones. Often the memories that stick out the most in our minds are things that happened right before the person died (or the last time we were with them), whether they were taken away from us suddenly or slowly. Sure, we also remember things besides our last days: we remember eating together, laughing together, intimate conversations, and thing like that." But those memories of what happened just before are vivid. When Janet's sister-in-law died recently, Janet recalled the last visit she and Nash had with her in January, the last time they saw her alive. Janet talked about all the things they had done that day. And after almost 50 years, I still vividly recall the last time I saw my father, as we shook hands before I departed for duty in Thailand where I received the call a few weeks later that he had died of a heart attack. They aren't the only things we remember, but they are prominent. I am sure that you can think of similar times from your own life.

Jesus, knowing he is going to die, gathers his closest friends for a meal. What happened there are the things they most likely recalled after his death. These are the memories they most likely recalled when they built his church. He had been with most of them for about three years, they had shared much, done much, learned much. But on this night, he not only reinforces the importance of sharing with each other, eating and being together, but he makes a point we hadn't been told about before in scripture. He, the leader of the group, God's son, washes their feet. No one is above another. Those who follow him must be servants, and perhaps most importantly, they must love one another as he loved them. The washing of feet is not just about service, though certainly that is important.

As the Rev. Tew puts it: "The foot washing is about Jesus' love and his willingness to show that love, even if it means the vulnerability of washing his disciples' dirty feet. ... Even if it means death by execution on a Roman cross. The foot washing is the acting out of the Great Commandment that we hear today (on Maundy Thursday), "Love one another as I have loved you."

"A fabled Baghdad merchant once asked his servant to run an errand. While at the marketplace, the servant rounded a corner and saw Lady Death. She terrified him so much that he returned in haste to his master. 'I am terrified,' said the servant. 'I want to take the fastest horse and ride toward Samarra. The master granted his request. Later that afternoon the merchant visited the market and he, too, met Lady Death. 'Why did you startle my servant?' he asked. Lady Death answered, 'Frankly, it was I who was startled. I couldn't understand why your servant was in Baghdad, because I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.'"

Yes, death is not something we can avoid, and because we don't often know when the end will come, may we, through the grace of God, live like Jesus, and love like Jesus. In that way, when death in this world does find us, we may be an inspiration and encouragement to those we leave behind. May their final memories of us be blessed with the knowledge that we loved them to the end, that we and Jesus are waiting for them beyond the grave.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen