

The Hebrew blessing "*L'Chaim!*" became familiar to most of us Gentiles through the popular Broadway play and movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. After Sabbath, father Tevye meets with Lazar Wolfe the butcher to arrange a wedding for his daughter Tzeitel. After the men conclude the deal, much to Tzeitel's chagrin, a celebration erupts with dancing, drinking, and singing the traditional Jewish wedding toast "To Life, to life, *l'chaim!*"

**God is Pro life.** *L'Chaim* is pure Hebrew theology. For Jews, life was always viewed as a precious gift from the Creator. God was responsible not only for the creation of all living things including humans, the very breath of life that sustains a living soul was vitally tied to the continuing vigilant presence of the Creator. But for Jews life came with boundaries, a beginning and an end, birth and death. Just as life began with God, life ended when the breath/Spirit of God departed.

Especially in early Judaism there was no clear vision of life beyond death. Early Jewish hope centered in the continuation of the family through children. Personal immortality, like the resurrection, came much later. Thus, the levirate law in the Torah (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) required a man to marry his brother's childless widow in order to father children in his brother's name and to prevent the widow from marrying outside the family. The decree reflected the patriarchal structure of the Jewish family. The woman had no choice in the matter. She had the same status as other family property, the sheep or goats.

If the surviving brother refused to marry his brother's widow, which he might do in order to inherit a larger portion of the father's estate, the woman had the right of revenge. She could take the case before the elders, spit in her brother-in-law's face, remove his sandal and denounce him saying: "This is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house." And the family will become known as the house of the man whose sandal was pulled off. The sandal was a symbol of property, the land on which the deceased brother had walked. Keep in mind, even in family politics economics often rule the day.

By the time of Christ, the rise of Jewish apocalyptic had produced a full blown hope for life after death through the resurrection of the body in the eschaton, the end time. The Pharisees were the party responsible for taking up and promoting the idea of resurrection. On the other side, the aristocratic Sadducees did not allow for any Jewish doctrine that was not based on the Torah, thus, no resurrection. The Sadducees were the priestly class in control of the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were the lowly laity who accepted the inspiration and authority of most of our Old Testament, including the late development of a resurrection hope. In spite of the Gospel criticism of Pharisees, the rabbi Jesus was a Pharisee in teaching on the resurrection.

During the Holy Week Inquisition, Jesus is questioned about his authority (Luke 20:1-8), about paying tribute to Caesar (20-26), and finally by the Sadducees about the resurrection of the dead (27-38). The hypothetical case presented by the Sadducees was less an inquiry for instruction than a rhetorical question to expose the ridiculous idea of resurrection of the dead. In the mind of the Gospel writers, the exchange was a prelude to Easter. Jesus was neither the first nor the only rabbi who had been cornered by the Sadducee *gotcha*. The game was, "Let's you and them fight." This was not the kind of vital question which one asks when life hangs in the balance. The inquiry was intended to inflame the debate and to cast Jesus in a bad light. The hypothetical case was carefully framed so that no answer would please anyone, and no response could rise above the indignity of the question. The whole business about a hypothetical woman who is widowed and married by seven brothers as required by Jewish Law was probably intended as a joke or perhaps a riddle for which there was no solution.

**Death is no laughing matter.** A few years ago, a human interest story was aired in the news about a lady in France who had lived to the ripe old age of 120. In a press conference aired on TV, speculation about the secret of long life touched matters of health as well as her attitude and philosophy of life. During the conference, the lady was asked a question worthy only of a reporter: "What do you believe the future will be?" With a twinkle in her eye, she quickly replied with one word, "Brief!" I suppose that this one person had at least 120 reasons why she could take the reporter's

question somewhat lightly. Truth be said: all of us are guilty of nervous laughter before the universal threat of death. Our jokes about death are a way of coping with terror. It is one of those areas of life where we laugh to keep from crying.

*The most significant aspect of Jesus' response to the Sadducees was his refusal to join in the laughter, to participate in the ridicule of resurrection, or to make light of someone's grief. Jesus faced death as the enemy to life. He grieved before the prospect of his own death. Luke records that his prayer following the Passover with his disciples was so intense that sweat fell like drops of blood. The Fourth Gospel reports that he wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. And this is the Gospel in which Jesus always seems to rise above the mundane things that bother mere mortals. In John, the cross is about being lifted up, and the death of Jesus is always overshadowed by the eternal life that he proclaimed. Even the suffering of the cross magnified by the Synoptic Gospels is minimized in John. The Lazarus story is also the passage where Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life"; and we cannot ignore that it is the place where he calls Lazarus out of the tomb.*

Yet, the shortest verse in the Bible appears before the tomb of Lazarus: "Jesus wept." Jesus cried like any other human soul in the face of death. He wept the same kind of tears that poured down the faces of the sisters Mary and Martha, the same kind of tears that have washed your face as you have stood at the boundary of life and felt the sharp pain of separation.

Have you heard the latest scandal in Afghanistan? Photos were posted on the web of U.S. soldiers posing with body parts of suicide bombers. Again, apologies and denunciations were issued from military command, and Defense Secretary Leon Pannetta again had to declare that this does not represent our values, regulations, or principles. True, it happens in every war and on both sides of battle lines. The problem is explained, if not excused, by the stress of war; and I heard one pundit wave it off because the terrorists show no respect for their own bodies. But the rules of war that require a level of respect for the enemy tend to break down on the front lines where death becomes as real as life.

What about the home front? No doubt you heard about the discovery last fall that body parts of U.S. soldiers were being routinely cremated and tossed unceremoniously into a landfill in Delaware. Perhaps it was more about ignorance than malice, but the public was justly outraged at the lack of respect shown for someone's son, husband, or father.

Isn't that the issue? When death becomes personal, suddenly our tolerance for levity about death disappears. If we could keep death at a distance as an abstraction, we could laugh it off; but everything changes when death comes home.

The response of Jesus to the Sadducee joke suggests that death does not meet us as an abstraction or a hypothetical case study. Death is personal.

***Issues of life and death are personal.*** Carlyle Marney was addressing a university audience when a student asked for him to share his views on the resurrection. Marney replied, "I will not discuss that with people like you. I don't discuss such matters with anyone under thirty. Look at you, in the prime of life, potent—never have you known honest-to-God failure, heartburn, impotency, solid defeat, brick walls, mortality. So what can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ be raised?"

I have been dealing with death personally for nearly a half-century of pastoral ministry. I was only twenty-eight, but I had been a pastor for more than five years, long enough to know that a death in the family cannot be waved off as nature taking its course. I learned very early not to dismiss the pain of grief as a violation of our hope for eternal life and that I could not offer adequate theological explanations to fix our problem with death.

I had found out through separation from real friends that the Christian hope passes through the valley of the shadow of death. There was no path around or above the pain for anyone who is up-close and personal with death. Then it happened to me. The death at age twenty-six of my wife, the mother of my children, sucked all of the laughter out of my soul. I had heard the nervous laughter at funeral homes. I cringed at the thought of releasing her body to the morticians. I winced at putting an obituary in the newspaper where total strangers could read of my personal loss along with the stock market report. At the cemetery, I resisted pressure from family and funeral directors to leave. While

the workers filled the grave, I stood in silence. I wanted my presence to squelch the laughter and loose chatter. It was my final statement of respect.

Finally I understood why Jesus took death seriously. The Sadducee joke on the resurrection was not funny. I recall revisiting that story in the Gospels. Suddenly the hypothetical case was no longer hypothetical.

So Jesus recalled the Torah. At the burning bush, God is identified with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—patriarchs of the Jewish family all dead and buried in Jewish memory. Jesus rose above the giggles in the background and the picayune inquiry to remind the audience of the nature of God in Jewish memory: “Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” For Jesus, the question of eternal life is not determined by our theological debates. The dead Patriarchs were alive in God. Without explanation or defense, Jesus assures both Sadducees and Pharisees among us that the eternal God of the creation is bigger than life and stronger than death, and far above our petty debates or our profound theological opinions about immortality.

Thanks be to God!