

More than Life

sermon digest

October 28, 2012

John 3:14-21; 1 John 1:1-4

larry dipboye

I read the play in high school, "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1938, but I didn't get it. I had not lived long enough to get it. The play has been a favorite for amateur theater around the US for half a century. But it was not written for kids; it is for people who have lived awhile. I got hooked on a radio interview with Penelope Niven who has just written a book about the author, *Thornton Wilder, A life*. Niven noted that the play really belongs to people who are at the end of life, my age.

Niven attributed the success of "Our Town" to the small town setting, Grover's Corner, New Hampshire, that seems to belong to everyone and has connected with audiences around the world. The bare stage without scenery and minimal props was Wilder's bet that the empty stage could be filled by the audience's imagination. The story is about life and death in a small town, but it comes down to a meditation on the meaning of life and the very solemn experience of death. In 1946, the Soviet Union refused to allow the play in East Berlin with the complaint that it was too depressing and might encourage suicide.

Niven believes that the death of Wilder's twin brother at birth lay behind the somber struggle with the meaning of life and death in the play. Like most "twinless twins," Wilder was haunted most of his life with survival guilt and wonder about the potential life of his brother. Act III, "Death and Eternity," takes place in a cemetery. The main character Emily Webb died at age 26 giving birth to her second child. As the funeral procession makes its way through the cemetery in the rain, Emily takes her place among the dead who sit as a group on stage as they observe the living and make small talk. Emily is allowed to return to observe her twelfth birthday, but finds the experience too painful. The living do not have a clue to the value of each day. The Stage Manager/narrator sums it up:

We all know that something is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars . . . everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.

Life has a beginning and moves toward an end. Everyone eventually awakens to the simple fact that life ends. The year was 1949. I was nine years old when my thirteen-year-old cousin was hit by a car and killed instantly. I remember the phone call. We had not had a phone in our house for long, and no one in our family could afford the cost of casual conversations by long distance. A long distant phone call was always a matter of grave importance. I remember the immediate rush to pack the family and load the 40-Chevrolet for the 400-mile trip to Oklahoma. I remember the open weeping of adults, my uncle's irrational conversation, and watching my grandmother as she sat and read from the Bible with my aunt as she sobbed. That was my first lesson in pastoral care. I remember conversations with one of the boys who was with Clobert that day; he was a cousin from the other side of the family. We walked together to the funeral home to see the body. Then they brought the boy to the house to lie in wake before the funeral. To see another child in a casket was shocking, but this was my cousin, my family. Then there was the funeral. The choir sang "Whispering Hope." Then the processional to the cemetery. This was not like the movies or the cowboys and Indians games that we played. This was real.

It was no coincidence; that same year, I professed my faith in Christ and was baptized. I had awakened to the reality that life is limited, that it comes to an end. Although my theology was commensurate with my age, I was sobered by an encounter with death. For the first time, I contemplated the reality that my life would end. This was the beginning of a long journey and struggle with death. In some ways it was good preparation for life. Two decades later the death of my wife required finding the words to explain death to my two preschool children, words of explanation that I could not find for myself. To no small degree the meaning of my life in ministry has been on the boundary with people going through the struggle of life and death.

I recall a conversation a few years ago with a church member who asked for more certainty when we walked through the valley of the shadow of death at funeral services. He did not want questions; he wanted answers. He wanted me to tell again about the golden streets and the place where there were no more tears and death itself would die. He wanted me to divert attention away from the body of death to the life in heaven with God. He wanted me to make everybody feel good in the face of our fear.

It was a good question asked in good faith. To be sure, we can find places in the Bible that point us toward heaven, but I found in my own struggle that distracting our view of death does not end the grief or

answer the fear. Even if we can distract folks for awhile, they eventually have to come back to the reality of death and learn to live with old questions refreshed by death in life.

Ludwig Feuerbach lived in nineteenth century Germany. His quest to understand the Christian Faith led to rejection and atheism. He believed that we are victims of our own wishful thinking. We create god in our imagination out of fear. Threatened by death, we project life after death. God is the result of that projection. Feuerbach's projection theory had a significant, though indirect, influence on Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, fathers of modern atheism. Feuerbach provided an intellectual basis for rejecting religion that continues to fuel the language of atheism today. But to find a rationale for religion in human psychology, however valid, does not invalidate the universal human quest for life beyond death.

The Christian faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the belief that as he is so we shall be, the Christian faith that not only our individual, personal selves, but the whole creation moves toward an end in which God shall be all and in all, was never grounded in absolute proof. The author of the First Epistle of John points to the revelation in Christ. Christ was not a figment of the imagination or a product of wishful thinking. Rather, "the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard." Early Christians did not proclaim facts, mathematical formulas, or proofs; they proclaimed the person of Christ. They, like we, lived by faith not fact. Life after death is one of those questions that does not have a pat answer. The only way we will ever know the meaning of death and life eternal is that day when we shall know as we are known.

Eternal life is more than life. I am amazed at the discussions buzzing around these days about the possibility of medical immortality. Absent the possibility that another black plague will strike before we arrive, the medical hope is finding a cure for every threatening disease and growing new organs to replace the ones we are wearing out. Of course, we also are aware of the way capitalist justice works; people at the bottom of the economic ladder are not as likely to get fresh organs and new drugs as the folks at the top. We also have good reason to wonder if a second or third century of life would be anything more than a magnificent trial of human patience. One might well imagine a scenario worthy of next Wednesday's horror stories *if* the Christian hope for eternal life were nothing more than an extension of time. In a world with burgeoning overpopulation, one has to wonder where we will all stand if death is taken out of the equation of life. Death has always been a part of life, serving the ecology of the creation, making room for the next generation. The future generations were the only hope available for the people of the Old Testament—for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. About two hundred years before Christ, Jews began to talk about the resurrection of the dead. Jesus shared the resurrection hope in his teaching in the Gospels, and the early Christians proclaimed the fulfillment of the life of Jesus in the resurrection on Easter morning.

John's Gospel mentions "eternal life" seventeen times, more than twice the number in the other Gospels added together. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke the word appears six times in the story of the rich ruler and one time in the parable of the last judgment. I recall sermons in my childhood about eternal life. It seems that the pastor was always stressing one dimension of life, how long the extension of life. But for John, eternal life concerns more than an extension of time. For followers of Jesus, life was never a two-dimensional, mechanical operation. Eternal life was not a gift at the end of life that comes with death. Eternal life was the experience of Christians who had begun to live by trust in the eternal God. The abundant life had depth as well as length. It was about living out the purpose of God in every breath. John links eternal life with the love of God for the world that is evident in the sacrificial giving of the Son. Believing in him was never about believing something; it was about the commitment of one's life to follow after Christ.

Wilder's play does not come down to the expected ending of most fiction: "they all lived happily ever after." The playwright dares to say what we already know too well about life, that they all lived to the grave; but he adds, that they lived their lives without the foggiest notion of the precious gift that each day was bringing.

The Stage Manager in "Our Town" said there is something eternal in every human being. Do you believe that? I personally believe that our lives, given by an eternal, loving God were not created for destruction. We did not come from nothing to return to nothing. We were created by an eternal God for an eternal purpose. Browning's poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" calls for aging people to "grow old along with me the best is yet to be, the last of life for which the first was born. The life we know ends. If John was right, the end in Christ is more than life.