

Death Is on My Mind Today

Death is on my mind today, in large part because we received a call this morning telling us that a dear friend is close to the end of her journey. Betty and her late husband Lehmon were among the first to welcome us when we moved to Savannah, Georgia almost thirty years ago now. They cared for our children on more than one occasion and took care of Norman, our son's turtle, when we were on vacation. Betty put Norman and his small aquarium in the center of their breakfast table as a centerpiece, and Norman always returned home a bit cheerier for the socialization with the Brantleys. They were the ages of our parents, but became the dearest of friends, which only proves that age is a matter of mind and not so much one of years. Betty was forever young in her thoughts, her ideas, and her energy. A student of scripture, she often bristled at prevailing cultural conventions holding to convictions that her peers may well have considered liberal—they were. In many ways, she was ahead of her time. In recent years, her world has grown increasingly small and isolated, and she has been ready to die. When we last saw her more than a year ago now, she told Mary that she would like to die, but then added with a conspiratorial smile: "many are called, but few are chosen." Maybe her prayer will be answered this time. It looks that way. In truth, death is never far away in my thoughts and that not because I have a morbid personality – I don't think I do – but largely, I think, because in my profession death is frequently close at hand. I suppose the only ones who deal with it more are hospice nurses and morticians.

Most people, though, have little or no contact with death. Death is something that happens to others, and when it does come close we are certain that there must be yet one more test, one more therapy, or one more medication that can be prescribed that can keep it at bay. Regrettably, we sometimes keep people "alive" long past their time, and very often that translates not so much as life as existence. Much of the time all that we succeed in doing is extending their suffering. We all die, sooner or later, we all die. Some of us die "before our time" and that is tragic, and some of us, having lived all the life there is within us to live, wait for death not so much as a dreaded foe as a welcomed guest.

"We grieve," one of the New Testament letters reminds us, "not as those who have no hope." Through our tears, our grief, our deep sense of loss, there is the promise of the Gospel that in Jesus God has entered into our life, suffered alongside us and for us, and through his death defeated the power of sin and by his resurrection shares with us the victory over death. Still we die, to be sure, but though we die, we live not because there is some inherent spark of immortality within us, some soul, that is immune to death, but because the God who loves us and cares for us, the God who gave his Son for us, wills that we live and holds us with a love "that neither death, nor life, nor anything else in all of creation" can sever. I'm in no hurry to die—I still have a lot of living left within me—but whenever that time may come, I pray that I will die as one who knows there is nothing to fear and the last breath will be a glad breath as I anticipate what is next to come.

Grace and peace be with you.

Dudley