

BAPTIST

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There is as much mystery about life as there is about death. In this western world of ours, we never really treat either of these realities with the respect that each of them deserves. Our acquired habits, customs and attitudes tend to make light of life and death; attempts are too frequently made to gloss over the only two certainties we have: life and death.

It is a painful exercise to watch generation after generation simultaneously disrespect life and death until each of them smacks us back into universal reality. It is no secret that social pain killers blunt life, making people think all things are made possible with chemicals, legal and otherwise, in order to cope. Then, to, there is the ultimate painkiller – suicide. Neither of these choices corresponds to understanding, living and respecting life. Both may appeal to some, but that is not an answer for many. It never has been nor will it ever be.

Life's questions, its challenges, its pains, its hopes and triumphs reach beyond the immediate context of the individual, family or community. We are constantly searching for answers, though at times they are just that – answers, not solutions. Answers are not solutions, only ways to them. And in order to move toward solutions, we need life. We need life even in the middle of terrible hardship and pain. Without life there can be no answers and clearly no solutions to life's problems and challenges.

Part of the social mean of coping with life's hardships was the church's emphasis on "life after death." That the suffering "servants" need not worry about the here and now; pain is only for a season. It was said, "The heavier the burden, the brighter the crown." Of course we know that is nonsense in its purest form. But echoes of those words are still present. For the church it is important to live and practice the understanding of life taught by Jesus in the here and now.

In the text (John 10:10) Jesus uses a metaphor for death. A thief, thief in the night, as it were. Death is like a thief – cunning, watching for another victim, universally detested. Stealing something of value, something it will never have on its own. That is like death – approaching unaware, victims largely unprepared, unexpected in the "normal" course of things.

It robs just like a thief; it robs the riches of life, health and even youth because it robs life itself. No one knows this as sharply as those who are called upon to donate a loved one's organs after an unexpected death.

The "world" has caved in, life has been lost, the future denied and anguish is all consuming. There is no easy way to approach people in this situation of human tragedy. In actual fact, one suspects that is a matter of case-by-case, family by family.

The "miracle" of transplants is one thing. Our having the vocabulary to address grieving survivors is another. We are yet to have a full language, the words to adequately convey the transplant message except on a pathway that still is not complete.

It is almost solely through confronting reality, confronting life and death with courage and sensitivity, that we can have a vocabulary that will match the progress in transplants. This science will continue to develop; it will move on. We have to see to it that our words and our actions keep it human and move with it.

Giving permission is an act that contributes to the legacy of life. It emphasizes "life before death." It is an act of love that gives back to others what death took away; it gives back life. Donors have been known to save as many as eight other people who would have been without hope had not the transplants taken place.

Such a gift is really treating life and death with the seriousness each demands. It, in a sense, is a celebration of life itself, another act of creation. We need to give thanks in the language of God because with each new day we can take it as God's personal invitation to each of us on this planet earth that we have an opportunity to try and try again until we get it right. And what is it that we need so desperately to get right? That God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven, that we as human beings have been ordained to have life and have it abundantly.