

Church of the Crossroads  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
March 9, 2008  
Neal MacPherson

THE COMMUNITY OF ETERNAL LIFE<sup>1</sup>

John 11:1–53

Perhaps death is not the terrible thing we may have thought it to be.  
Writes William Sloane Coffin:

Death is more friend than foe. Consider the alternative—life without death. Life without death would be interminable—literally, figuratively. We’d take days just to get out of bed, weeks to decide “what’s next?” Students would never graduate, faculty meetings and all kinds of other gatherings would go on for months. Chances are, we’d be as bored as the ancient Greek gods and up to their same mischievous tricks.

Death cannot be the enemy if it’s death that brings us to life. For just as without leave-taking there can be no arrival; without growing old there can be no growing up; without tears, no laughter; so without death there can be no living.

Death also enhances our common life. Death is the great equalizer, not because it makes us equal, but because it mocks our pretensions at being anything else. In the face of death, differences of race, class, nationality, sexual orientation all become known for the trivial things they ultimately are.

Finally, with no deaths there would long since have been no births, the world being overpopulated with immortal beings. Just think: Giotto, maybe, but no Cézanne, let alone Andy Warhol; Purcell, maybe, but no Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, let alone Aaron Copeland; Roman gladiators yes, but no Sugar Ray Robinson or Mohammed Ali. And, of course, no you and me,

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<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed this title from Sandra Schneiders who uses it as the title of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of her book, *Written That You May Believe* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999)

no grandchildren!<sup>2</sup>

I like those words. They are helpful—intellectually, certainly, humanly, and perhaps even emotionally. On the other hand, one cannot take death too lightly. In other respects, death is a frightening thing. It means the end of all we know and have grown to love. And for us who love a dying person, we must face the prospect of that person’s physical absence in our lives.

Death was a particularly difficult reality for those who belonged to the Johannine community—the community for whom the Fourth Gospel was written. Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel as the One who grants the gift of eternal life here and now: “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but *have* eternal life.” (John 3:14) Not *will* have some time in the future, but now in the present. The question for the members of the Johannine community was the seeming incompatibility between the eternal life that Jesus grants in the present and the reality of physical death. This Gospel is not concerned with the fact that people were dying before the second coming of Jesus—a concern that occupied many early Christians. Indeed, John’s Gospel has no interest whatsoever in the Second Coming of Jesus (I am happy to report). As Sandra Schneiders puts it:

. . . The problem [in John’s Gospel] is not that that Christians die too soon (i.e., before the last day) but that they die at all. How is death compatible with eternal life possessed now in all its fullness by believers? The real question is that of the Jews, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”<sup>3</sup>

Schneiders is correct. Jesus makes no attempt to keep Lazarus from dying. In fact, upon hearing of Lazarus’ illness, Jesus stays away two days before going to Bethany. The death of Lazarus is real, as are the deaths of each and every human being—those who believe in Jesus as well as those who do not. At first Jesus says that Lazarus is asleep and that he is going to awaken him. The disciples, as usual, do not get the point. They think that Lazarus is literally asleep, and their misunderstanding gives Jesus an

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<sup>2</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 168.

<sup>3</sup> Schneiders, *Ibid.* 153.

opportunity to tell them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.” (By the way, I hope that we do not take the story of the raising of Lazarus literally—it is surely metaphorical in the best sense of the word.)

“Lazarus is dead,” Jesus tells the disciples, plainly. Death is a frightening reality, and the death of a friend causes us to be deeply distressed and to weep. Jesus himself is not immune to these. Jesus weeps over the death of his friend. Some scholars say that Jesus weeps because of the lack of belief on the part of Mary and the Jews. It is Martha who believes in Jesus; Mary has not yet arrived to belief. But Jesus does not weep because of their lack of belief. He weeps because they weep. He weeps because Lazarus is dead.

This Fourth Gospel will not rob us of the pain and reality of death. Our culture could take a lesson from the Gospel about the reality of death. Our very language betrays our fear of this reality. We speak of someone “passing away” or “passing over to the other side.” On viewing a body, we say, “My, it is as if he were sleeping.” We say everything except the one thing that needs to be said: “He is dead.”

Christian faith is not Gnosticism—that is, it does not say that death is an illusion (as in the case of Christian Science). Nor is Christian faith stoicism—it does not say, “Well, we live and then we die, and that is that.” Unlike Gnostic notions, death is real and so is the suffering it causes. Therefore, tears are in order. And unlike stoicism, neither is death simply the end. For Christian faith, it is an occasion for hope, not despair.

That is what Jesus seeks to affirm in the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Death is real, but it cannot destroy the hope that is given with the gift of eternal life. The point is not that Lazarus is finally rescued from death. He must die again. The point is that eternal life conquers death without abolishing it. Jesus raises Lazarus to physical life in order to reveal himself as resurrection and life. Both these are received as we come to believe in him.

Indeed, for the Christian, death is real and brings tears, but death also brings us to freedom and to life. Again, words preached by William Sloane Coffin:

The one true freedom in life is to come to terms with death, and as early as possible, for death is an event that embraces all our lives. And the only way to have a good death is to lead a good life. Lead a good one, full of curiosity, generosity, and compassion, and there's no need at the close of the day to rage against the dying of the light. We can go gentle into that good night.<sup>4</sup>

As for heaven and hell, I have no interest in them whatsoever. A neighboring church has been engaged in a Lenten series, "What Is Heaven Like?" I am not interested. I once heard Charles Hartshorne, the founder of Process Theology, asked, "Dr. Hartshorne, if there is one thing in Christian thinking that you would like to get rid of, what would it be?" As quick as a flash, Charles Hartshorne replied, "The one thing I would like to get rid of is all notions of heaven and hell, for as long as you have them, you have people doing the right thing for the wrong reason." We should do the good thing, simply because it is a good thing to do and not that it will get us anywhere.

I appreciate Process Theology, by the way, and Process Theology has appreciated the Fourth Gospel. Process theology holds that new life emerges at each and every moment and that every moment is an occasion for newness. That movement towards life and newness extends beyond death. Death itself becomes an occasion for newness.

Each of us has to work through the fear that is associated with death, and once we do, we find ourselves prepared to live life in its fullness. We are a community of eternal life. The gift of that life is given to us now through our believing in Jesus, who is life and resurrection, and not even death can destroy it. That, my friends, is good news. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>4</sup> Coffin, *Credo*. 167.