

LIFE AFTER LIFE MAY 30 2010  
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
M. KENT MILLARD

Today is Memorial Sunday when we remember the lives of those whom we have loved in this world and who are now living with God in eternity.

Now for people in Indianapolis this is Race Day and has been for the past several generations since about 250,000 people are in town today for the greatest racing spectacle on Earth. But for the rest of the nation this is Memorial Sunday so today I would like for us to pause and remember that life is eternal.

In John 14 Jesus was preparing his disciples for the fact that he would soon no longer be with them physically but would enter eternal life. Here is what he said to them and to us about eternal life.

DO NOT LET YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED...IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE ARE MANY ROOMS...I AM GOING THERE TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU...PEACE I LEAVE WITH YOU.

St. Paul also writes to the Christians in Rome when they were suffering persecution and the loss of many of their loved ones. He reminds us that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

From Romans 8: WHO SHALL SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF CHRIST...FOR I AM SURE THAT NEITHER DEATH NOR LIFE...NOR ANYTHING ELSE IN ALL CREATION WILL BE ABLE TO SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD.

Prayer

This past week I did some research on how Memorial Day began in this country.

Memorial Day used to be called Decoration Day because it was a day when people decorated the graves of loved ones lost in war or any loved ones with flags and flowers.

Decoration Day began after the Civil War between the 23 Union states of the north and the 11 Confederate states of the south and which lasted 4 years between 1861 and 1865 when Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States.

This past week I read that we lost over 625,000 soldiers from the north and south in the Civil war which is 15,000 more military losses than we lost in the Revolutionary War, World War 1, World War 2, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan all put together. Think about that terrible loss of life: 625,000 Union and Confederate troops lost their lives in that terrible War Between the States.

During the Civil War, the Confederate troops had a prison camp for captured Union troops at the Hampton Park Racetrack in Charleston, South Carolina. Hundreds of Union soldiers were prisoners of war there and many died of illness and starvation and were buried in a mass grave.

The Civil War ended in April, 1865 when General Robert E. Lee surrendered Confederate troops to General Grant at Appomattox, Virginia. After the Civil War was over and the slavery of blacks was ended, African American freed slaves in Charleston, South Carolina came to the Hampton Racetrack and

reburied all of the Northern Union soldiers who had been buried in a mass grave in their own individual graves in a special cemetery. Then on May 1, 1865 just a month after the war was over, 10,000 people, predominantly freed slaves came to that cemetery, decorated each Union soldiers grave with flowers and had a special service thanking God for all of those predominately white boys from the North who gave their lives so that Blacks could be free of slavery.

I thought it was amazing to learn that freed slaves began Decoration Day to thank God for those who died for their freedom. And today, we still thank God for all those soldiers from all wars who died so that we might live in freedom.

Other cities around the nation began to have their own Decoration Day services to honor those who had died in the Civil War.

In 1967, Congress passed a law designating the last Monday in May as Memorial Day when we would pause to thank God for all those American soldiers and sailors who have given their lives in the defense of liberty from any war.

I wonder how many people here have lost a family member in any United States war.

Memorial Day has also been expanded in the minds of many Americans and they often remember any of their loved ones who have passed from this life to the next.

On this Memorial Sunday I thought it might be helpful to examine what the Christian faith teaches us about death and eternal life.

In John's Gospel we are told that Jesus had a last meal with his disciples where he washed and dried their feet and gave them instructions to become servants to all those in need around them. The disciples were filled with fear when Jesus told them that he would be leaving this world, so Jesus responded by saying to them:

**DO NOT LET YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED AND DON'T BE AFRAID. TRUST IN GOD, TRUST IN ME. IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE ARE MANY ROOMS AND I GO TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU SO THAT WHERE I AM THERE YOU MAY BE ALSO.**

Jesus uses an analogy about eternal life. He tells them that eternal life is like a big house with many rooms and there is room in this gigantic house for all of us. Jesus tells us that he goes to prepare a place for us that where he is there we will be also.

This is simply an analogy of what happens after we die. It is as if we leave this world and enter into another realm of life where there is a room or place for us. Physical death is not the end; it is simply a doorway into another room of life.

St. Paul makes a similar point when he writes to the Christians in Rome who are suffering persecution and death from the Roman Emperors because of their faith. He tells them and us that nothing in life or death can ultimately separate us from the love of God which comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul's point is that God's love comes to us here and now through the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus and when we die we continue to live in the presence of God's love that is made known to us through Jesus of Nazareth.

When Jesus and Paul talk about our physical deaths, they assure us that there is nothing to fear, that we can trust in the eternal love of God, and that we will continue to live in God's eternal love.

On this Memorial Sunday when we think about all of the soldiers and sailors who have lost their lives in war and all of our loved ones who have died, we need to focus our attention on what Jesus and Paul teach us about death and eternal life.

My analogy is something like this. We were all living souls in the hands of God and then we became flesh in a physical body when we were born into this world. We will live in this physical body for awhile, sometimes a long time and sometimes only a short time, but for all of us our physical bodies will eventually wear out and we will leave them behind and continue our lives in eternity with God.

A popular way of putting this today is to say that we are not primarily physical beings who have spiritual experiences; we are primarily spiritual beings who are having a temporary physical experience. We are primarily a soul living in a body.

The popular writer Eckart Tolle puts it this way. He says that there is no opposite of life; life is eternal and everlasting. There is birth and there is death but life exists before birth and beyond death.

In the creed that we say every Sunday we say WE BELIEVE IN LIFE EVERLASTING, which means to say that we believe in life eternal.

Now, my way of looking it is this. Something that is eternal means that it has no beginning and no end. It is eternal going backward in the past, and it is alive in this current moment, and it is eternal going ahead into the future. Eternal means it goes on forever in the past, present and future.

Therefore, when we say that we believe in eternal life, we are saying that we believe that we were alive in the past before we were born, we are alive now in this present moment, and we will be alive in the future when our physical bodies pass away.

Sometimes we talk as if eternal life begins when we die but the truth is that we had eternal life before we were born, we are living in eternal life right now because this moment is a part of eternity, and when we die we continue to live in a different form.

My Wednesday morning book study group just finished studying a book by BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY who is the religion editor for National Public Radio. Her book is entitled *FINGERPRINTS OF GOD* with the subtitle *THE SEARCH FOR THE SCIENCE OF SPIRITUALITY*. She examines all of the medical studies over the past 50 years which have tried to find the fingerprints or signs of God in our lives.

One of the most convincing signs of the spirit for Barbara Hagerty is called the near death experience. Near-death experiences occur when a person is technically and physically dead for a brief period of time and then returns to life and what sometimes happens to people when they are technically dead for a brief time.

Barbara reports that over the past thirty years there have been more than 40 scientific studies of about 3,400 people who have had near death experiences.

In the 1970's a doctor named DR. RAYMOND MOODY published a book entitled *LIFE AFTER LIFE* in which he interviewed hundreds of people who had had near-death experiences and reported on what was similar about their experiences. He maintained that these interviews show that there is life after life when this world is over.

He also reported that there were many common elements to people who have had these experiences. They frequently see themselves above their bodies where they can see and hear everything that is happening around them. Then they feel themselves being drawn through a tunnel and at the end of the tunnel is bright light. They frequently encounter people they have loved from the past who have entered eternal life, and they universally report being in the presence of a bright light and have a feeling of peace. Many times, they do not want to return to their bodies and do so reluctantly.

Pam Reynolds is a musician and owner of Southern Track Recording Studio in Atlanta and Barbara interviewed her for her book.

Fifteen years ago when Pam was 35 years-old she was a singer, songwriter and mother. She began to have excruciating headaches and went to a neurologist in Atlanta who found a large basilar artery aneurysm in the middle of her brain, which if it broke would take her life immediately and, because it was right in the center of her brain, surgery would be next to impossible. The doctor told her to get her affairs in order because she could not expect to live much longer.

However, Pam heard about a neurosurgeon in Phoenix, Arizona who had pioneered a new way of operating on brain aneurysms like this so she went to see him. Dr. Robert Spetzler developed what he called a stand still operation in which Pam was made unconscious, her eyes were taped shut and her ears plugged, she was attached to a heart lung machine, her body was packed in ice, her heart was stopped and all the blood was drained out of her body. When all the blood was drained from her head, the aneurysm sac collapsed for lack of blood, they went into her skull and snipped the sac and removed the aneurysm.

During that time, the brain monitor went completely flat and there was no brain activity at all, she had no pulse, no blood pressure and no respiration; she was not breathing. Normally, when someone has no brain activity, no heart beat and no breathing, we would call them dead.

However, after Pam was literally put to death, they fixed the brain aneurysm, sewed up her skull, put her blood back into her body and restarted her heart with a defibrillator. Pam regained consciousness and is still alive today.

What has made her story most interesting is what she experienced during the surgery when she was technically physically dead.

Pam said that she was conscious the whole time. She felt herself pop out of the top her head and she was above her body and she could see clearly the entire surgical team and process. She was able to describe with complete accuracy the bone saw that was used to open her skull, she watched as doctors tried to insert a tube in one artery in her leg and said, "Her artery is too small," and another doctor said, "Use the other side," which is exactly what they did.

When the surgery was over, she watched as they defibrillated her twice to restart her heart while she was completely unconscious and technically dead.

Now, while this life-saving surgery was going on, Pam saw a pinpoint of light that grew bigger and bigger as she moved towards it. When she got to the light, she saw her grandmother and her Uncle David who had both passed away years earlier and they looked like they were wearing coats of light.

She asked them if God was the light and they answered, "No, God is not the light; the light is what happens when God breathes." Pam said she felt like she was standing in the breath of God which is light.

Pam's statement reminded me of what I talked about last Sunday about how Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT." It was through the breath of Jesus that we experience the light of God.

Pam said she felt totally at peace and did not want to return to her physical body. Her Uncle David was with her and she said her body looked like a train wreck and she didn't want to have anything to do with it. While she was hesitating, her uncle pushed her and she reentered her body and now has completely recovered from her brain surgery.

Pam told her doctor, Dr. Spetzler, about her experience and he said: "From a scientific perspective, I have absolutely no explanation how that all could have happened. What she describes is exactly what we did in that operating room but I have no way of knowing how she knew it. It comes down to a soul experience and it is ultimate arrogance for someone to try to explain it away because it doesn't fit their world view. What she describes is what we did and there is no way physically that she could have known all this."

There are thousands of people who have had experiences like this and live to tell about them. I see this as simply confirmation of what Jesus said: IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE THERE ARE MANY ROOMS AND I GO TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU THAT WHERE I AM THERE YOU MAY BE ALSO.

Barbara Hagerty attended the INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR NEAR DEATH STUDIES conference with prominent doctors from around the world and dozens of people who had had near death experiences and shared them with her.

Barbara also interviewed many of the doctors who have written articles in medical journals discounting near-death experiences as hallucinations or the last gasp of a dying brain. Some doctors maintain that these experiences can be explained as oxygen deprivation to the brain and parts of the brain are still functioning and giving the person mysterious experiences.

Another doctor discounted the theory of oxygen deprivation because Pam's brain was completely shut down; brain activity was flat-lined and there was no part of the brain working to give her these experiences. Furthermore, there was no way that she could see or hear what was being said since her eyes were taped shut and her ears plugged.

When those facts were pointed out to the doctor who wrote articles discounting near-death experiences, he simply replied: "I know it can't happen and that is the end of it." It sounds like this doctor was saying, "Don't confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up."

Many people in our world discount the idea that we are anything more than a physical body and any evidence which points to the existence of a soul or life beyond death is simply discounted on the basis of their preconceived notions.

During my ministry I have had about a dozen experiences with people who have had near-death experiences - they have technically died and then returned to life and have a story of consciousness during the time they were out of their body.

Several years ago, I was called to hospital emergency room late one night because a young man about 25 years-old had had a massive heart attack. I did not know this young man but he was dating a young woman in our congregation and while they were on a date, he collapsed with a heart attack.

He was rushed to the emergency room of the hospital, his girl friend called me and I came to sit and pray with her in the waiting room. While we waited there, a doctor came out and told us that it did not look good and they would probably not be able to save him. However, about half an hour later a nurse came and told us that he was still alive and would be taken to the intensive care unit of the hospital.

The next day, I went to see him in the intensive care unit. We visited briefly and then he said: "Can I tell you about a strange experience I had while I was in the emergency room?" I said "certainly."

He said that he suddenly experienced himself above his body. He could see his body on the table and see and hear everything that the doctors and nurses were doing. He said he was aware of how hard they were working and how anxious they were to save his life. He wanted to tell them not to be so anxious about it because he was still alive even if his body didn't survive.

Then he said he felt himself going through a dark tunnel at the end of which was a bright light. When he got to the bright light, he saw his grandmother who had died years earlier and he felt her unconditional love for him. He wanted to stay with her but she told him he had to return.

Then next thing he knew he woke up in the intensive care unit. He asked: "Have you ever heard anything as strange as that?"

I told him that I had heard stories like his many times and he had what is called a near-death experience; where he was technically dead for awhile but his soul was free from his body and he had a brief experience of eternal life in the light of God. I gave him a copy of Dr. Raymond Moody's book *LIFE AFTER LIFE* so that he could read about hundreds of other people who had had similar experiences.

Later I asked him how this experience might change his life. He said that his grandmother was a very religious woman who had prayed for him all of his life. He said he had not been to church in many years but now he was sure that what his grandmother had told him about the love of God was true and he started coming to church every Sunday, reading the Bible and praying.

He also told me that he knew there was nothing to fear about death because he experienced it as a place of incredible peace and light. He was also glad that he got to come back and change his life style and become a more compassionate, loving and faithful person.

There are about a dozen other personal experiences I could share with you about these experiences in eternal life but these are enough to simply assure us all on this memorial Sunday, that death is not the end of life; it is simply a doorway we will all go through someday into eternal life with God.

On this memorial Sunday as you remember service men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom or remember another loved one who has entered eternal life, know that your loved ones are safe and at peace in the hands of God and we will be reunited with them when our time in these physical bodies is complete.

Jesus told us that there is life after this life and at his last meal with his friends he said that whenever we eat this meal remember him and that he is with us always. It is as if when we remember him he is spiritually present in this time and place.

I also believe it is true that when we remember any one of our loved ones who have passed away they are spiritually present in that moment.

When we eat the bread today in communion, I would like for us to remember that it is the bread that nourishes our spiritual lives and when we drink from the cup we are drinking or receiving God's love and peace into our lives.

Let us pray.