

Some Concluding Thoughts

Ray Jennings

(Ray spoke the following words as his final sermons. First on November 27th, 2005 at First Baptist Oakland, California, and again on January 8th, 2006 at Shell Ridge Community Church in Walnut Creek, California.)

Text: Acts 13: 32-41 (KJV/CEV)

The First Sunday of Advent. The Sunday after Thanksgiving.

I appreciate the invitation to preach this Sunday.

When Jan Scott invited me she asked me to speak about my recent health issues and present experience in Hospice care. That is not easy and I am not sure I can. If I stop midway, please understand. We'll provide a printed copy later.

I have thought of several ways to approach this assignment. The first is to simply outline what has happened... During a routine blood panel my primary care physician noted some abnormalities and future tests indicated the likelihood of pancreatic cancer. Immediate surgery was considered, I saw a series of oncologists and specialists. It was decided it was too late for surgery and we made a plan for chemotherapy. The oncologist then decided that it was too late for even that. I have been poked and prodded by the best doctors in the Bay Area.

This has meant lots of doctors, daily piles of pills and many questions. "How are you today?" I refuse to give an organ recital every time somebody asks about my welfare. To say "OK" or "Fine" would be a lie. To say, "Rotten" would be both unwelcome and misleading.

The fact is that aside from a loss of energy and of appetite, I am, right now, in fair shape. Muddled thinking. Tiring quickly. Short tempered. Wondering what comes next. It is harder on my family, especially Irene, than on me.

But, to simply list the events and feelings is not enough.

There is no quick or easy answer to the questions Jan's invitation raises. Life is a day-to-day -- even hour-to-hour -- existence. But I sense God's presence and I believe in life beyond the grave.

Remember the old hymn "Further Along." It tells us that "We'll understand it all by and by." We're closer to understanding life than we were a few years ago. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her 1969 book "On Death and Dying," has outlined five "stages" of dying:

1. Denial and Isolation
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

I don't think I have gone through these stages, certainly not in her order. The stage I am aware of is that of acceptance. I think there are several reasons for that. When my doctor made the diagnosis she called our family into a meeting and told us of her prognosis, she gave us suggestions and options. She was open. That helped.

At the same time I was not a stranger to death.

A close boyhood friend had died suddenly after a fall in the church parking lot. I was with him when it happened. My mother had died in her 40s when I was only seven years of age. My father had died on the first day of Spring -- in his 50s when I was seventeen. As a pastor I have seen and served many persons in the final stages of life. I believe this was all preparation.

Something in me simply said, "It's your turn, now." I found myself recalling my father's death -- before he got to see me graduate from high school and then college. I discovered that my father was closer to me day by day (even now) than he would have been still alive.

I remember one of the women in the church criticizing me for "not feeling" when my father died. She was wrong -- and her criticism hurt.

Think about our text for today, Acts. I have one verse in mind: Acts 13:36.

“For David, after he had in his own generation served the counsel of God, fell asleep, and was laid unto his fathers and saw corruption....”

There is a lot declared in that verse.

David served the will of God
David served his own generation
David died and was buried

Not so with Jesus who was raised from death.

I pray that this can be said of me. The verse tells us the purpose of life (to serve God) and the promise of eternal life.

Irene and I have a wonderful family. Not perfect but wonderful. We started as two and now we number almost 25 (one “on the way”). Seventeen (17) of our family gathered at our oldest grandson’s home in Gilroy for Thanksgiving Dinner.

Driving down, we had a car for women and a car for men. I’m sure the conversation in the women’s car was more interesting than in the men’s.

Our son, Ken, drove the men. He played CD music. It was contemporary Western and, although I’m a Country and Western music fan, I had not heard much of it. A phrase in one song caught my attention. The song was “The Painter” by Neil Young, a Bay Area artist.

The phrase/refrain was simple: “It’s a long road behind me.” But the next line is “It’s a long road ahead.” I believe we travel a long road ahead.

Death is transition. A door, a tunnel. There is more to come.

May the thoughts of my mind and the words of my mouth be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. -- Amen.

In 1989 I penned this for my “Epitaph.” If there is any celebration of my death, I hope it will be read.

Dig me no grave;
Build me no ornate crypt;
Mingle my ashes with earth;
Fling them to the winds I have flown
 To far flung places on this globe;
 All “home” to me.

Sing me no dirge;
Craft no glib obituary;
Remind those who have loved me
Of the themes that moved my life;
 Love of church, a world at peace,
 The oneness of humanity;
 A few choice friends, family ties;
 Integrity.

Shed me no tears;
Squander no time in mourning;
Rejoice in my translation;
Celebrate my now-found freedom;
 Free from all past limitation;
 Free to travel without luggage;
 Free from hellos or goodbyes;
 Free to write sans editors;
 Free to sing, off key or not;
 At home with God.

When mortal life has left this flesh,
I’ll revel in eternal life;
I’ll know as I’ve been known;
See what long I have but visioned
 I’ll work and not grow weary,
 No day, no night, no deadlines;
 I’ll travel unencumbered;
 Write and sing without reserve,
 My Lord alone to satisfy;
 My Lord, my judge.

Ray Jennings

Note: Ray’s “Epitaph” was indeed read at the celebration of his life.