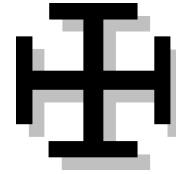


A Pastoral Letter



Through the Shadowlands: A Christian Handbook on Death and Life

DEDICATION:

During twenty-six years of experience in pastoral care I have walked the path of death and dying with many of the sheep entrusted to my care. It was only when I walked that road not as pastor, but as son, that I discovered the full impact of the sting of death and the still fuller impact of the church's ministry.
This letter is dedicated to the memory of my father, whose guiding hand and unflinching faith are my treasured inheritance and for whom I remain ever thankful.

In Memoriam:
Harold Edward Senkbeil
1915 - 1997

- ***Understanding Death***

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. These familiar words of Psalm 23 chart the direction for a Christian family facing the reality of death. Here God identifies our greatest enemy in such times: fear. Since none of us among the living has ever tasted death, we respond to the prospect of death (whether our own or that of someone we love) with fear. Fear is natural.

Now if fear is the enemy, who is our ally? The Psalmist continues: *For thou art with me; thy rod and staff, they comfort me.* Jesus our Good Shepherd, the one who laid down His life for the sheep, is our companion on the dark winding road that leads through the valley of the shadow of death. The journey is not optional. Sooner or later each of us, no matter how old or young, will walk that path - until Jesus comes again, when at the last trumpet the faithful will be changed in the twinkling of an eye. (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

But here's the important part: *I walk through the valley.* The One who is with us in that journey, who leads us on, bears the scars of death in His living body. He was dead, but now He lives forevermore. All who believe and are baptized will be saved: they have a share in His victory over death. Christians therefore see death not as an unfortunate reality to be endured, but as a defeated enemy. The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting are the sure and certain realities promised to all who remain faithful unto death.

- ***During Prolonged Illness***

Faith and confidence are what we need in the face of death; faith in the Good Shepherd and confidence in these three unseen realities: the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Sometimes death comes suddenly. At other times it comes slowly, after prolonged illness. In both cases the ministry of God's Word and Sacrament is our only lasting source of comfort. The Christian family will want to call soon and often for pastoral care. The pastor's visits bring not only human consolation and comfort, but the sure presence of Christ through His Word and uniquely and especially in His Supper. With His Body and Blood Jesus has removed the sting of death and shares with us His never-ending life in the very midst of our dying. *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.* (John 6:54)

- **At the Time of Death**

The Christian family will want to alert the pastor when it seems that death is drawing near. Such requests are always welcomed; pastors want to be with their flock in such situations. The sanctifying power of the Word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:5) provide comfort and solace in the midst of what otherwise would be only a fearful struggle. The pastor's visits will be more frequent in such times; he is called not only to visit the sick, but to comfort the dying. *Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints.* (Psalm 116:15)

The presence of family and friends is particularly comforting to the dying Christian. Don't be afraid of what to say; the simple and ordinary things of life bring extraordinary peace and strength in such days and hours. Conversation is important, and since hearing is often one of the last senses to leave dying persons, they should not be deprived of the sound of human speech -- especially the voices of those they love. Human touch is also important for the dying person and his or her family. A handclasp, a gentle caress on the cheek, a comforting hand on the forehead -- all such physical contacts bring strength to the heart.

As death approaches, Christian families will find strength in the timeless prayers of the church. What is learned by heart in childhood sustains us in death's final hour. Frequent use of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, the rich treasures of Christian hymnody, and God's own prayerbook, the Psalms, shine the light of eternity along the path to death's dark door. Above all, through such prayer and song Christians find renewed faith to echo Christ's own words from the cross: *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.* (Luke 23:46)

When death occurs, the pastor or the surviving head of the family may offer a short prayer of thanksgiving for all of the blessings received by the departed during his or her lifetime, especially for the abundant gifts of forgiveness and life through baptism into Christ Jesus our Lord. And so begins the process of separation from the body of the departed, which will culminate with the rite of Christian burial. This is not to be feared, for the body will be commended to its final resting place in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth. Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.* (Revelation 14:13)

- **The Christian Funeral**

Soon after death occurs, the family should meet with their pastor. They will need the added consolation of the Word of God and prayer. Sometimes the departed has already discussed plans for the funeral service. In any case, general plans for the funeral are best reviewed with the pastor before arrangements are made with a commercial funeral director. While personal reflections and eulogies by family members may be helpful to the bereaved, they are best shared prior to the funeral service at a family gathering or visitation at the funeral home. The Christian funeral is a public worship service of the church, and the components of the funeral are the same as other services. Prayers, litanies, hymns, and the proclamation of God's Word bring transcendent and lasting comfort to those who mourn. The pastor will suggest hymns appropriate to both the church year and the circumstances.

While funeral services may be conducted in funeral chapels, the use of the church sanctuary is highly recommended. Here in the place set apart for the Name and worship of the Holy Trinity the departed received the consolation and peace of God's holy Word and Sacraments, and this sacred space brings unique comfort to those who mourn. If the family wishes, the church lounge provides a place for visitation with family and friends before the service begins.

The pastor meets with the mourners in an appropriately private place to lead them in devotion and prayer just prior to the service. During this time the funeral directors prepare the casket for the procession to the head of the aisle.

- **The Burial Rite**

If at all possible, funeral arrangements should include a graveside service. The reverent burial of the body of one they loved brings added comfort and consolation to a grieving family. Here again the emphasis is on the resurrection of the flesh, which is sown this side of eternity in dishonor to be raised in glory on the day when Christ shall come to judge the living and the dead. (1 Corinthians 15:42-43)

The blessing of the Holy Trinity stills the anxious hearts of all the faithful:
May God the Father, who created this body, may God the Son, who by his blood redeemed this body, may God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be his temple, keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh. (Burial rite)

Consideration can be given to ask representative family members to remain for the closing of the grave. Such participation often lends a sense of closure to the whole process of parting and this stage of grief. These representatives may also wish to place handfuls of earth in the grave as a loving gesture of committing their loved one's remains to the earth in confident expectation of the Resurrection Day. *Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.* (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

- **Symbolism and Ceremony**

Elm Grove Ev. Lutheran church is blessed with several furnishings which are available upon request for use during funerals.

* The Paschal Candle

This candle, richly ornamented, stands lighted near the altar during the forty days between Easter and the Ascension, where it recalls our Lord's visible, physical presence during those days.. At other times it stands unlit near the baptismal font, where it is visually depicts the invisible presence of the risen Christ with His church. During baptisms it is lit as a reminder that all who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Galatians 3:27), being buried with Him in His death so that they will share also in His resurrection from the dead (Romans 6:3-5). If the candle is used in the funeral service, it stands lighted near the casket of a baptized believer in joyful anticipation of the resurrection of the body.

* The Funeral Pall

This large, richly ornamented white cloth provides a covering for the casket during the service as a vivid visual symbol of the royal robe of Christ's righteousness bestowed on all the baptized by faith. The large ornamental golden crosses are emblems of the Sabbath rest of the saints in light. A brief opening rite for the service provides for the reading of Romans 6:3-5 while the casket is vested with the pall prior to the opening procession.

* The Processional Cross and Torches

While the processional cross is ordinarily used for festival services, its use in a funeral provides powerful visual testimony to Jesus Christ as victor over sin, death, and hell. As the cross leads the procession, so Christ leads all His faithful through death and the grave into eternity and a joyful resurrection on the last day. The optional accompanying torches (processional candles) signify the light and life which Christ brings into a world of darkness and death. Family members may serve as crucifer and torch bearers, or church members will be provided upon request. The cross may also be taken to the burial rite at the cemetery as a symbolic reminder of the authority of Christ over death and the grave. *O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55-57)*

• **Grief and Christian Consolation**

Christians are not afraid to cry. As our Lord wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus, so we find ourselves in tears at the pain of our loss. But we do not sorrow in the same way as those who have no hope. *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those*

who have fallen asleep. (1 Thessalonians 4:14) We look forward to a grand reunion with loved ones who have died in faith. Still, we miss them. The separation can seem at times overwhelming. This pain is part and parcel of grieving; it is to be welcomed, not resisted.

Grieving for most people is a journey. It is a journey from the initial pain of parting toward healing and reconciliation with our loss. The pain gradually subsides, but the loss remains. Grief has many dimensions and may seem unpredictable in its ebb and flow; yet in Christ we find strength along the way. For in this journey, too, we are not alone.

Christians find that family and friends are God's gifts in helping bear the pain of loss which seems at times unbearable. Such company is important in dealing constructively with grief; it must be consciously sought out by those who mourn. Most who mourn find it very helpful to tell the story of the death of those they love to family and to trusted friends. The repeated narrating of that story brings release and insight into the joy and sorrow of the parting. Friends and family will want to lend a listening ear and heart for such telling and retelling; it is a rare privilege to be entrusted with such treasures. *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* (Galatians 6:2)

Above all, Christian mourners will turn to the worshipping fellowship of the church and the rich comfort of God's holy Word and Sacrament for healing along the path of grief. For Jesus Christ abides within His church through these sacred means of Grace. Through these channels He bestows the riches of His forgiveness, life and salvation now and to all eternity. And uniquely and especially at His altar we are already joined with the faithful saints at rest, whose eternal victory song resounds in heaven above. *Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we laud and magnify your glorious name, evermore praising you and saying: Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of Sabaoth.* (ancient liturgical prayer)



Almighty God, by the death of your Son Jesus Christ you destroyed death, by his rest in the tomb you sanctified the graves of your saints, and by his glorious resurrection you brought life and immortality to light so that all who die in him abide in peace and hope. Receive our thanks for the victory over death and the grave which he won for us. Keep us in everlasting fellowship with all that wait for him on earth and with all in heaven who are with him who is the resurrection and the life, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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