

From this Corner
STANDING OUR GROUND IN THE FACE OF DEATH
A Post Easter Reflection
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One of my least favorite parts of life is death. My guess is that most healthy people would concur.

I remember the first funeral I ever attended. I think it was the service for my paternal grandfather's sister-in-law. Her name was Pearl. My parents probably thought it would be a good experience, as I had no close personal relationship with the deceased. It may have seemed that I would not take it personally. To the contrary, I took it personally. If I had been more articulate at the time I would have stated that a) I did not want to be there, b) I did not care to look at her, and c) the service was fifty-nine minutes too long. I was in a big overstuffed chair in the back of the funeral parlor. I had slouched down as far as possible and thankful that I was far from the action. The only problem was that there was an old woman in front of me who kept turning around to give me a long sad stare. I have no clue what her motives were. They may have been of good intention, but it seemed to me to be the "look of death." Every time she looked, I slapped my hands over my eyes.

My antipathy with death continued in the years that followed. I had to pass the local funeral parlor on my walk home from school. Everyday the first thing I did leaving classes was glance to see if there was a funeral in progress. If so, I walked the long way home. I did so because a hearse once blocked my way. I remember coming to an abrupt halt a few feet away. Then it happened. The driver of the big black station wagon turned and looked at me with that same sad "look of death" I had seen at Pearl's wake. I ran cross lots and down a hill, falling in the mud before arriving home. I was severely reprimanded for my choice of routes. I never revealed I had chosen the fastest way to escape death. I took the punishment content to have escaped with my life.

You may be wondering how I ever became a pastor with this particular phobia. There are few ways a pastor can avoid the reality of death. To date I have officiated at close to 200 funerals.

My method of dealing with it was to hire myself out in college as a “professional pallbearer.” I along with a five college friends worked for a funeral home to provide a dignified service. We wore suits and had white gloves. It was my way of looking death in the face. I know it sounds strange, but it seemed to work, that combined with several years of theological reflection.

A long time and a lot of living have passed since those days. Ironically, I now exercise to stay healthy by walking in Lakeview cemetery near the district parsonage. I pass by thousands of graves on my way, including that of Lucille Ball of “I Love Lucy” fame. However, hers is not my favorite even though I have directed many a tourist to the site. A rather simple yet substantial gravestone that simply gives the person’s name and states in larger and bolder lettering, “IN CHRIST”, marks my favorite.

It sums up for me the truth of our faith that “IN CHRIST” the final enemy is being defeated. It has been my privilege as a pastor to stand with hundreds of Christian sisters and brothers to proclaim the gospel at funerals and memorial services. In those, we have looked death in the face and have stood our ground.

“By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Peter 1:3)