

Living fully is life's most rewarding gift. Young or old, rich or poor, at the peak of our performance or at low ebb of our vitality, life remains a precious gift and we may savor its richness throughout our lifetime.

Often the awareness of this precious gift is overshadowed by our busy, almost frenetic activities. The gospels encourage us to be good stewards of this gift but also to take time to reflect on its beauty, meaning, goodness, and eternal nature. Preparation for this kind of abundant, joyful, and fulfilling living is not possible without thoughtful consideration of life's ending.

Our culture often denies the reality of death and usually views death as a negative experience. The gospels, while recognizing the pain of separation brought on by death, nevertheless see life as a whole and death as a transition from life in the reign of God not fully realized to life in God's full reign in heaven.

In the past five years, I have had the privilege of being close at hand as first my sister-in-law, then my oldest brother, and more recently, my second and last brother faced the experience of dying. I call it a privilege because each shared openly about their fears and their faith as they experienced what can only be described as a good death. Each of them had lived a full life and had made more preparation than most for this last great experience of life.

In each case they were surrounded by those who loved them, by skilled medical professionals, loving caregivers, and the gentle and wise care provided by hospice staff.

Not all die full of years and ready to embrace this last experience of life, largely perhaps because we are unprepared for death whether it comes soon or late. It would be foolish to say that the death of a child, a young mother, or an aging grandfather each have the same impact or consequence for those who remain. Yet when we take seriously the gospel teaching that life is eternal, death does indeed lose its sting.

All of us will die and all of us think about death. But remarkably we seldom talk about death in a calm and rational way. The emphasis of our culture is on youth and staying young, and even the church has been strangely silent about one of the two most universal experiences of all humans, birth and death.

Why the silence? Is it because this greatest mystery is something we do not understand? Is it because we fear the end of life as we know it and therefore deny the reality of death? Is it because we simply do not have the will to face our own mortality? Is it because we do not want to be considered "otherworldly", disconnected from the real issues of life in the here and now?

Is it because our theology has no place for life that is eternal? Jesus had a lot to say about the eternal nature of life, and he lived a life that demonstrated an

awareness of living at home in the kingdom of God in both this world and the next. Why is the church so hesitant to share this way of living? Could it be that we do not know how to keep these two homes in balance? Living at home with God in this world and trusting that we will live at home with God in the world to come is not as easy as it may seem in a society that is in denial about the active presence of God in this world and the promise of the world to come.

To live fully and die well requires deep personal faith as well as an inviting, vital, welcoming, supportive, and nurturing community of faith that presents opportunities to talk openly, honestly, and frequently about the mystery of this last great experience of life in this world. This material seeks to make possible that kind of honest and faithful seeking that guides us to discoveries about ourselves, leads us to a new level of joyful living each day, and helps us make the kind of careful preparations that will offer the opportunity of dying well when our days in this world are coming to an end.

Our life is not without purpose. No matter who or where you are, your life has meaning. You can make a difference for good in the world. We do have a destination, and all of life is indeed a journey that for the Christian leads toward God in this life and the life to come. Christians through the centuries have proclaimed that death is the doorway that brings us finally and fully home to God and to the place where all the saints are gathered in light and life.

The good news is that we do not make this journey alone. Our faithful Savior has promised to send another One to teach us, companion us, guide us, and stand beside us in all of life's experience (John 14:16). With God's help through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to live fully every day and embrace with trust, obedience, and hope the day of our transition from life in this world to life in the next.

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