

“A New World Order”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Existentialist Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre tells a story in a play that he had written, that takes place in an attic house in France during World War II. In the attic were six men and women who had been captured by the Nazis and put in the attic. The next morning they were going to be assassinated - hung.

Suddenly, as they were sitting there contemplating their impending death, the door opens and the Nazis throw in someone else - a seventh person. This seventh person was not going to be killed. It was just someone who was out after curfew. The door shuts and the six who were there looked up, and saw that the person thrown in was the leader of the entire resistance. They couldn't believe it. He was there, but not in any real trouble. He sat down and they [those who were captured] said to him, “We will not give you away - not one of us - even to the moment we die, we will say who you are.” He said, “Thank you. I thank you on behalf of the resistance, and I thank you on behalf of France.”

Then, out of nowhere, one woman (as the play goes along we find out it is his fiancée, of all people) stops and she says, “Oh, shut up. Nothing you have to say could possibly mean anything to us. I'm not blaming you. The fact is that you are a living man and I am a dead woman. The living and the dead have nothing to say to each other and that fact puts an impenetrable barrier between us.”

She didn't believe that she could even speak to her fiancée because he was going to live and she was going to die, and that impenetrable barrier separated her from having any further relationship.

That is how we as human beings feel about God. God is so omnipotent. God is so powerful that God cannot understand what we are going through. We are to die and God lives for all eternity; an impenetrable barrier between the divine and the all too human. Then Jesus came and he lived a life just like us - complete with child birth, complete with suffering, ultimately pain and death on a cross, in the most horrible humiliating, despicable fashion. So not one of us ever again can say that Jesus - who is the Messiah - could ever be separated from us, because he experienced everything we will ever experience and that impenetrable barrier has been torn down - now and *always*.

The sad part is that not too many people really are aware of it. God is with us and yet they do not understand. The breaking of that barrier, according to the Gospel writer in John, says that we embrace death, that we are to hate our lives, and we are supposed to follow Jesus from death to life. How in the world are we supposed to do that?

I don't even understand it. First, to embrace death we have to contemplate our own impending death. Now, why? The reason for that is that when we truly contemplate our death, we realize that we have no control over it. We are going to die, every single one of us. So are we just going to allow ourselves to fall into the abyss of nothingness, or are we going to hold fast to the promise of life eternal, that is only given through Jesus Christ?

What does it mean to hate our lives? I don't think it means that we are supposed to be bitter and just sit there stubbornly until we die, so that we can go to Heaven. But I think it means to not be too attached; to not become so enmeshed in this world that we do not have the time, the energy or the inclination - even the vision to see another world greater than this one.

To follow Jesus from death to life means that we are to recognize our own limitations and the limitless power of God, who could take Jesus, take him off that cross, raise him from the dead and ascend him into Heaven. If God has that power, God has the same power to do the same for both you and me. There is no abyss there. We don't have to be scared of death there, because if God has that power, God has the ability to heal you and me as well. That is a message that so many people need to hear.

Now Jill just had - thank goodness - a week of CEUs, because I was really struggling with a finish to this sermon. But she had [these classes] because it was spring break, and we don't want too much moss growing under my wife's feet. She had to go to school this week for continuing education units. Thank goodness they did a whole class time on death and dying, so I had her take notes for me.

One of her stories - my wife is a nurse so she was studying about death and dying as it relates to nursing and care - was written by Bronnie Ware, who is an Australian nurse. She [Bronnie] works in palliative care, caring for patients in the last 12 weeks of their lives. As she would work with these people - who are in the middle of dying - she would write down their epiphanies about life and death, and about what scared them and what gave them hope.

She wrote - and went on to write an article which later became a book - about the five regrets that people had as they prepared to die. She said the number one regret that people had when they were dying was: "I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself; not the life others expected of me." This was the greatest regret of all - men and women alike. Most people have not lived a life that honored themselves in their own dreams. She said most people didn't even touch half or even a quarter of the dreams they had growing up. They settled. It's only at the end of their life that they realized just how much they settled, and how little passion was really in their lives.

She said number two was: "I wish I hadn't worked so hard." That was the number 1 response from men and every man that she ever cared for said that was their number one regret. They missed their child's youth; they missed time they could have spent with their partner. It was gone. She said it was the number one response for men because she was working with older men, who happened to be the bread winners for that generation. She said, "I wonder what will happen now that women are also working full time, also trying to balance everything." She assumes that will become number one in time.

Number three: "I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings." she [Bronnie] said, many people suppress their feelings to such a degree - just to keep the peace for others - that no one really ever heard them. They settled for a mediocre existence where their true feelings were never heard, understood or respected. In fact, many of those people developed illnesses stemming from the bitterness that came from not having anyone

willing to hear their story - hear their feelings - because their feelings were never validated.

Number four: "I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends." Ware continues, "They did not truly value the true friendships until their dying weeks, and then it was too late to reach out. They were not able to reconcile relationships and they died often wishing and missing."

The fifth one: "I wish I had let myself be happier," I love the way that is phrased - I wish I had let myself be happier. Why I like the way that is phrased is because many people do not realize until the end that happiness is often a choice. We can let people manipulate how we feel or we can take responsibility for our own happiness. It isn't until the end that many realize happiness is a choice. They got stuck in old patterns and habits - the fear of change or pretending for others; the giving up of themselves. They long to laugh more and to be silly, and they realize how much they missed.

Now, I agree with Bronnie Ware's five regrets, but I would like to add another one that I find glaringly missing, and I assume Ken would agree because we have sat down with literally hundreds of people who were in their last moments of their life, and not once did I ever hear someone say, "I prayed too much." But I have heard a lot of people say, "I didn't pray enough." Waiting for a God they were not sure they knew how to communicate with, or a God they were not sure would actually be there. And in your last moments of life, that is all that is left.

Then I was reading this book. (You are sick of me talking about this book, because I have raised it at least three times. This time it's for a different reason.) It is a book written by David McCullough, Jr. and it is titled, "You're not Special and Other Encouragements." I quoted it to lambaste the way kids are acting and the way parents are raising them. (The last perfect parents were Jill and me. No. Oh, Good Lord, no!)

In the last section of the book - the last couple of chapters - he [McCullough] starts talking about death. I want to read a quote for you because it was so amazing. He had talked all of this time about how to raise your kids and how we shouldn't be raising them. How the educational system feeds into all of these troubling situations that have arrived with children, youth and young adults. Then, suddenly, he goes on to talk about death. I think what he is trying to say is, "you need to reach for all of the gusto," like the old beer commercial said. Carpe diem and all that other stuff.

But, it comes across empty. He says this is ontologically misleading. Death is not and cannot be a person, place or thing. Death is not a state of being - rather it is an absence of being. Death is a non-state. It is the great negative. It's not even an "it."

Shuffle off the mortal coil and there is nothing, empty space. We do not, we cannot experience death. There is nothing there to experience it with - not to find comfort in the remembered life, however happy and full. Death is nothingness - last and lasting - the ultimate non-noun.

If verbs are your thing, with the arrival of death one goes irretrievably from present to past tense, with hardly a gulp in between. One does not then pass away - one vanishes. I

went, “Oh, if that’s how life ends, why would you even want to live and what is there to live for?”

Sometimes we wonder - as more liberal, protestant Christians - what we evangelize for. We don’t think God necessarily casts a whole bunch of people into hell, so why do we bother to evangelize?

We evangelize if for no other reason than to give people hope. People who think that when you die you do nothing more than vanish. Imagine the agony of the last weeks and days of a person’s life, if all that happens to them when they take their last breath is they vanish to nothingness. They become neither a noun nor a verb.

He [McCullough] is a wonderful writer. What made him so wonderful is he made clear the fatalism of a faithless life. We can’t let that story end with non-existence. We need to encourage people to see and to know. He [McCullough] fulfilled the definition of his book: None of us are special and none of us are encouraged because we all going, not to hell, not to Heaven, but we are going to nothing. How desperate that will feel in the last moments and weeks of a person’s life when that is all there is.

Jesus Christ’s message is life-giving and life-affirming. Nothing in this world means anything unless there is God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit moving us in this world. Otherwise it is just fatal nothingness. It is selfishness. It’s grab all you can get and the heck with everybody else, because I need it, I want it and it is about me, before I become nothing.

But, not for a Christian. We don’t live just for today. We live in today. We make it meaningful. We grab the carpe diem, but we do it because we know that life does not end in death. Our decisions can be humble; our decisions can be selfless, because we are working beyond this life. We celebrate that we can let go in this world, knowing that there is a God with outstretched arms waiting for us in the world to come, and people need to hear that message.

We can walk away from abyss and the nothingness and walk into God’s eternity. It’s your choice to make. There is some sense of free will and we need to grab it, to be passionate about it, to share it.

Outreach takes place not just by feeding people with the food, but feeding them with spiritual food that gives them the hope of realizing that there is more to life than just this world in which we live (and this one life according to Sally Field, selling her Boniva. Oh, I hate that commercial – “You have just this one life!”)

No, we have so much more. We need to grab it and share it and show the Divine that is all around us. It begins by accepting it. If you have – wonderful – renew that acceptance! If you haven’t - or you know someone who hasn’t - share with them the difference between nothingness and the belief in life eternal. Give them hope so that in their last weeks and days of life, they can talk with the enthusiasm and trust that Jesus spoke with his Apostles and Disciples, so that they could feel the truth and the comfort of life now and for all eternity.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen