

We Will All Be Changed

1 Corinthians 15:12-26; 50-57

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We have arrived at the final Sunday of our 2022 Faith Questions sermon series. I have simultaneously enjoyed this year's series and been challenged by it in a unique way.

You ask good questions. You ask *hard* questions. I've said it before, but I'll say it again; I am thankful to serve in such a thoughtful congregation. It is gratifying to see that people are wrestling with big issues in the context of Christian faith.

And I have been reminded of how important it is to create space for questions in the life of faith.

Over the past decade or so, I've lost track of how many times I've read some study or poll analyzing what accounts for the decline of the church, among the young and the old. Inevitably, somewhere on the list, I always read, "My church wasn't a safe space to ask questions or express doubt honestly."

I don't think that a sermon series by itself solves that problem. But I do think it can play a part in nourishing a culture where wrestling together with hard questions is a normal and expected part of the life of faith.

Ok, we end our series this year with... the end. The end of life, that is. Or, I should say, the end of our *earthly* lives.

We're talking about death. What happens when we die?

I chose to address this question last very intentionally. In a few days, on Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent by acknowledging that we are dust and that to dust we return.

But is that all we can say about death? As we stand here on the doorstep of Lent where we begin to make our way to the cross, is there more to us than dust?

The Christian hope has always been a loud “yes!” We are not ultimately defined by Ash Wednesday but by Easter Sunday, thanks be to God!

But death still looms large in our imaginations. We still have questions, fears, anxieties about what we *can* or *should* hope for when it comes to life after death.

Well, as a way into a difficult topic, and because I know it’s been a difficult week and many of our hearts are heavy with what’s going on in the Ukraine, I’m going to begin on the lighter side.

I’m going to begin with the popular tv show Ted Lasso. Ted Lasso is an average American college football coach from Kansas who, through a combination of events and circumstances, ends up being hired to coach a soccer team in England.

He knows nothing about soccer and even less about England. He comes across as a naive, over-optimistic, smiley, moustached, middle-aged American who is thrust into a story much more complex and cynical than he realizes.

There’s a lot more I could say about Ted Lasso but suffice to say that the show mixes the hilarious with the at-times profound.

Death makes an appearance in one of the episodes in season two. The team owner Rebecca’s father dies. And Ted and his colleagues find themselves talking about what happens when you die.

They cover a few of the bases when it comes to common views out there.

Roy Kent, a gruff foul-mouthed old-school player is asked by his girlfriend where he thinks Rebecca’s father is right now.

Roy responds, “In the drawer of a funeral home.” “No, I mean, like, *spiritually*,” she implores. Roy looks at her blankly and says, “In the drawer of a funeral home.”

Well, there’s one answer to the question of what happens when we die. Nothing. Many hold this view (or at least claim to). Roy goes on to sum it up even more bluntly: “You live, you die, you’re done. Good night.”

Higgins is the communications director for the team. He smiles placidly and says, “I like to imagine a heaven where animals are in charge and humans are the pets.”

There's another common view. Heaven is a blank canvas for whatever our imaginations might want to imprint upon it.

Coach Beard is a bit of an eccentric, and he offers this: "You know, if you weigh a person's body right after death, it's 21.3 grams lighter, and some say that's the weight of the soul."

Interesting. I'd never thought of what a soul might weigh.

Nate, the trainer looks wistfully upward and sighs: "I'd like to be reincarnated as a tiger. And then ravage anyone who looked at me wrong."

Reincarnation is the idea that history is cyclical and repeating, and that we come back as other creatures or aspects of nature. This is a prominent view in Eastern religions and many more secular folks who like to dabble in them.

Ted himself offers this: "I used to believe that if you did good things, you went to heaven, if you did bad things you went to hell. Nowadays I just think we all do both, so wherever he is, I hope he's happy."

This would probably be the default view of many people. A vague hope for happiness in light of the conflicted creatures that we are and the impossibility of knowing anything for certain.

All in all, a fairly accurate reflection of the cross-section of beliefs out there these days about what comes after death.

The funeral itself is also interesting. It takes place in a stately Anglican cathedral, but it's clear that many have no idea what to say or do in such a place.

The Lord's Prayer, Amazing Grace, and Psalm 23 make brief appearances, but overall, the funeral is a deeply confused and conflicted experience for most. Death is mostly something bewildering. It is kept at arm's length, deflected away by humour, booze, and nostalgia.

It struck me as a near perfect snapshot of our cultural moment.

A vague memory of the Christian hope (or at least the symbols and songs and prayers), but no real clue about what it means or interest in engaging it properly.

So, what can we say about this question? What have Christians said through the ages? What does the Bible say about this important matter?

Well, perhaps surprisingly, huge parts of the bible are pretty much silent. The Old Testament has very little to say about life after death or what we might expect.

There is the concept of “Sheol,” a shadowy underworld of darkness to which all the dead go, a place of stillness cut off from life and from God.

There are occasional glimpses of hope that Sheol may not have the last word—a few psalms, for example. But in the OT, hope beyond the grave is of a very general sort.

Perhaps the most well-known expression of a hope beyond death in the OT comes from the book of Job. Job has been suffering and arguing with God and his friends for nineteen chapters by this point, when he says these words:

I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another (Job 19:25-27).

There are controversies about how the Hebrew is best translated in this passage, but there is the powerful hope—demand, even!—that Job will see and be vindicated by God beyond death.

In the New Testament, a general hope becomes more specific. Jesus bursts on to the scene and changes everything when it comes to how we understand life and death and what we can hope for beyond the grave.

1 Corinthians 15 is one of the more detailed passages on these matters in the New Testament. Paul makes crystal clear that what Christians hope for is not harps and clouds or pets or vague happiness or tigers, but *bodily resurrection*.

This was a scandalous claim at the time, and it remains so. It is an outlandish hope. It shocked people in the first century and it should probably still shock us today!

Jesus’s soul didn’t peacefully migrate up to heaven from the tomb in which his body was laid. He was bodily raised!

He appeared to his disciples, he hung around for a while, he ate breakfast by the beach, he explained a few things before ascending as the risen Christ, Lord of history, and Eternal Victor over sin, death, and evil.

Paul puts it plainly. As in Adam, all died, so in Christ all shall live. Bodily death came through a human being. Eternal life comes through God in human flesh.

We don't know what our bodies will be like. Paul alludes to resurrection bodies that are somehow similar to but different from the bodies we now inhabit. But we struggle to conceptualize all of this.

We simply affirm the hope that we will all be changed (1 Cor. 15:51). We believe that somehow the God who spoke creation into being at the beginning can be trusted to speak new creation into being at the end.

One of the biggest question many people have is what happens in between death and the last judgment and resurrection to new life. Where are our departed in the in-between time? Where or to whom will we go when we die?

There are a few views out there about the intermediate state, but I must say at the outset that we simply don't know much about this.

Scripture only offers hints, but in the broadest possible terms, there are two tracks. There is either a conscious or an unconscious intermediate state between our individual deaths and the final judgment.

Some speculate that death leads to conscious existence in an intermediate state. This would be something like the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, where those who die in Christ go for post-mortem purification until the final judgment

Protestants largely rejected this view, I think correctly, although it's led to all kinds of confusion and Hallmark-y additions to our theology (i.e., floating up to heaven on harps and clouds immediately at death).

Others say that the intermediate state is unconscious (or at least it is experienced as such by us). Some call it something like "soul sleep."

At death, there is an "interruption" in consciousness. The person who dies is in fact unconscious/non-conscious until the day of the resurrection at which point, they come back to consciousness.

Perhaps our experience of space and time is different at death and what in linear time would be hundreds, or thousands of years is experienced as a blink of an eye on the other side of death.

For some, the intermediate state is a source of anxiety. How can God resurrect bodies whose physical stuff is gone? Is the “blueprint” for each human life retained in the mind of God? Are we more like a memory or the code from a computer program or...?

Again, we can't say. Again, I would simply point to the deep hope that a God who made something from nothing once can do it again.

Whatever we believe about the specifics about the afterlife and how the chronology all works, I think the resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us an unshakable hope that the dead are “held by God.”

This is the kind of language I try to use around death and dying, specifically when asked where people's loves ones are “right now.” I say, “they are with God” or “they are held by Christ.”

We can even say, “they're' in heaven” provided that by this we mean, “they're safe in the presence of God, anticipating the new creation that is to come.”

We who have placed our trust in Christ can face death and the intermediate state with confidence because whatever it is and however it is experienced, it cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ.

And this is where I want to end. With Christ. The *word* Christ, specifically.

This week, I came across an article by James Brenneman in *Anabaptist World*. Brenneman is the former president of Goshen College, and current member of First Mennonite Church of San Francisco.

The article was called, “There's Just Something About That Name: Why It's Better to Be ‘Jesus-Centered’ than ‘Christ-Centered.’”¹

“Christ” is a title. It is from the Greek word *christos* which is used to translate the Hebrew “anointed” or “Messiah.” “Jesus” is a personal name.

When we focus too much on the title and not enough on the name, Brenneman says, we risk downplaying the human aspects of Jesus, the fact that he was a poor, brown-skinned middle eastern teacher who lived a humble life of service and compassion, and turn him into the

¹ <https://anabaptistworld.org/theres-just-something-about-that-name/>

triumphant suspiciously white European-looking Jesus that looks down on us from the cathedrals and artwork of Christian history (as in the funeral in Ted Lasso).

“Jesus” is the humble rabbi, the peacemaker, the pursuer of justice, the critic of organized religion, the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount.

“Christ” is the abstract subject of all the creeds and doctrines, the one who has been used to legitimate all kinds of nasty institutions and wars throughout history.

We need to focus more on Jesus and less on Christ. This is the way to reach young people who care more about social justice than all those exclusive beliefs, and who are embarrassed about all of Christianity’s past sins. So says Brenneman, at any rate.

Now, I get the point that Brenneman is trying to make. I can even agree with parts of it, even if I think he has mostly just attributed all the good things about Christian history to the word “Jesus” and all the bad things to the word “Christ.”

And I don’t like to be disagreeable, especially with distinguished Mennonite pastors and theologians. But this seems to me an entirely false dichotomy.

We don’t have to choose between “Jesus-centered” and “Christ-centred.” They belong together. They are inseparable. We *need* not—indeed *must* not—separate the name from the title.

In Matthew, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Peter famously responds, “You are the Messiah (the Christ), the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus doesn’t say, “Well, that’s true, but you should probably just downplay that part.” He says,

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it (Mat 16:17-18).

Blessed are you, Peter! A deep insight into the nature of God has been revealed to you! The name and the title forever go together.

Jesus *is* the Christ, the one anointed by God to save the world. Jesus the Christ is both the humble teacher and the Lord of history. And we need him to be.

After reading the article, I read 1 Corinthians 15 again. It is telling that in a passage about death, the word “Christ” appears 18 times.

The one reference that stood out to me is the one that stands out to many, verse 17:

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

Those are strong words. But we need strong words for things as ugly as death.

We need the risen Christ to hold out hope that death can be overcome.

We need the risen Christ to strengthen our hope as we contemplate the horrors of what is going on in the Ukraine and ponder what this might mean for the days ahead.

We need the risen Christ as we sit at the bedsides of those whose earthly journeys are nearing an end, as I did this week, with Henry Dick.

We need the risen Christ as we look ahead to our own deaths and wonder what we can actually hope for.

We need the risen Christ to save us from sin and futility and to strengthen our faith in the Lord of Life.

I'll close with the words of Paul:

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

