

Soul Talk for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost September 17, 2016

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Living to the Lord

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Romans 14:7-9

This morning I am aware of several recent deaths by suicide in Iowa, most recently in Stratford. These deaths deeply effect our lives. While I had intended this soul talk not to be about these recent deaths, I pray this soul talk with you today will facilitate some sense of healing for anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one by suicide.

Many years ago, I received a phone call from a funeral director. Calls from funeral directors usually means there's been a death. I knew of no one who was on my "watch" list, so I was expecting the unexpected.

"Pastor, we have a family who is looking for a pastor and a church; and they were hoping you and your church could help. A young man has died of suicide. Would you officiate and would the church be open to having his service in the sanctuary?"

As most, if not all, of us in United Methodism would say, "Yes, I will officiate his funeral, and I am sure his funeral can be in the sanctuary."

We made the usual arrangements with the organist and the UMW for serving a meal. This funeral, in some ways, was no different than other funerals; but, of course, it was different.

I was still new to this pastoring thing. I do not remember if I had finished seminary or not.

I met with the young man's family. They were very broken about his death. They shared with me a request. His older brother was in prison in a southern state. Would I call him and tell him over the phone about his younger brother's death? I took a deep breath and said I would call him. They gave me the name and number of the volunteer prison chaplain. Through him a call was set up.

The older brother was broken by the news. The chaplain comforted him. We prayed together.

As I prepared for the funeral I went looking for appropriate Scripture. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes, "There is a time for every matter under heaven and on earth," felt very uncomfortable when it came to this death by suicide.

Isaiah's words in chapter 43 seemed more appropriate, "I have named you and claimed you and you are mine. . . When you pass through the deep waters, they will not overwhelm you."

The family, if I remember correctly, asked for the 23rd Psalm.

And in my study, I found chapter 14 in Paul's letter to the Romans.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.

This portion of Scripture has been used by pastoral members of the body of Christ to comfort the family and community in the loss of a loved one's life due to suicide. There is no condemnation, no judgement; only consolation and the assurance of Christ's life, death, and resurrection for both the living and the dead, regardless of how the death has occurred.

This has profound implications for how we approach the grief in death; but it has equal, if not more, implications for the church today and for our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Paul's words seem to say, *above all the ways that you may be divided and fractured by life, by deeply held beliefs, by walks of life, cultures and clans, above all this and more, live to the Lord.*

If we live, we live to the Lord; if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or we whether we die, we are the Lord's.

This is the truth of the whole matter of life and death, of tribulation and joy, we are the Lord's.

There is a whole host of ways in which the world, nations (including our own), our communities, our politics, the church, and our churches are as divided as the Roman church was when Paul wrote to them.

They argued over doctrine, discipline, and how to live in the community and the world.

And in the end, Paul, said,

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

I realize this sounds ominous, more than a bit overwhelming, *being accountable to God.*

I am sure this line alone has caused more theologians over the years to form and create all sorts of doctrines and dogmas to put up a fence around the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that no one would be accused of violating the love of God in Jesus Christ or taking it cheaply. But this is what the Pharisees did to the Law of Moses. And we know what Jesus had to say about this.

Actually, being held accountable by God is good news.

It is a reassurance of the forgiving and redemptive grace of God in Jesus Christ as we navigate the complexities of living our lives, not just for ourselves, but also for the whole of humanity and creation, for the countless persons who come after us – our children, our children's children and beyond.

And for our church – Christ's church, even the United Methodist Church.

It was bound to happen as soon as General Conference adopted the Council of Bishops' recommendation to form the Commission on the Way Forward, giving them a charge to study and pray over the difficult issue of human sexuality we find ourselves debating, setting a timetable for their report, and the commissioning of a special session of General Conference.

It was bound to happen that we would say to each other, "Why bother with church initiatives, with efforts to formulate discipling processes, with laying plans that would go far beyond 2019 and 2020 when we will surely split up into multiple denominations and the United Methodist Church as we know it will die."

Paul's words are for the church just as much as they were for the members of the church in Rome.

Even as the church, and especially The United Methodist Church, *if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. And to this end Christ died so that he might be Lord of both the living and the dead.*

Which is to say, loyal and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ – you members of The United Methodist Women, do not lag in zeal for doing the good things of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

With more energy and prayer than before, offer yourselves to the healing and redemptive work Jesus has gifted you to do. This is the ministry of the Gospel.

With more energy and prayer than before, open yourselves to the guiding and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit and join in God's work of making disciples for the sake and love of Christ who died and rose again for you, for me, for your loved ones, for those who are strangers among us, and for the world and all of its peoples.

With more energy and prayer than *ever before in your lives and in my life*, let's live to the Lord, for whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's – as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. Amen.

May you live in the presence of the risen Christ today.

Harlan

Soul Talk is a mostly weekly commentary written for the souls of preachers and other pilgrims and the soul of the church. I always welcome comments on Soul Talk at harlan.gillespie@iaumc.org.