



The Potter's House, UCC

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The Talk

Mark 12:18-27

Do you remember the talk? You know, 'The Talk.' Maybe your parents told you. Of course, maybe they didn't. Some parents have a hard time with 'the talk.' Maybe your parents told you, and you've now told your kids. Or maybe you haven't. Maybe you've had a hard time with 'the talk.' Maybe your friend in fifth grade had to explain it all to you after he heard 'the talk' from his parents. That means you only heard it second hand. Maybe you know someday you're going to have to give the talk and that makes you feel giddy. Maybe you've never even heard 'the talk' and are wondering what I'm talking about. Regardless, it's not something you're likely to forget. After all, this talk is about 'the facts of life.'

It was Christmas Day, 1979, when I got 'the talk.' There I was, in my Charlie Brown pajamas, when I opened it. A book. "Where Did I Come From?" "Great," I thought, "What I really wanted was a Star Wars figure." I was far more curious where Yoda, Obi One Kenobi, or Darth Vader came from.

If you've never seen the book, it's rather funny. It's done in cartoon form. An odd juxtaposition, to say the least. The animated facts of life. So after the presents were all opened, my dad and I retired to the kitchen table. My mom hovered nearby, pacing nervously back and forth. It started out innocently enough. Parts and names. Yeah, yeah. Growing and changing. Yeah, yeah. Then we reached the 'relationship' section. Total nausea. The word 'yuck,' which flew from my mouth repeatedly, failed to capture the feeling. But I made it through. I learned it too. But I still thought the idea of a stork delivering babies was simpler and neater.

Some day I'm going to have to tell Natty B about the facts of life. Thankfully, that's a few years down the road. Since he's a boy, Robin reminds me, it's my job. But I still have some time to brush up. But I've started doing something strange recently. I've already begun giving him the other talk – the talk almost no one gets – the facts of death. And I don't really know why. I know it must sound rather morbid, but it just felt natural. Sometimes, when we say our bedtime prayers, I tell him about family members he'll never get a chance to meet. I think it's because I wished he would have know them, they him. And I know he doesn't cognitively understand, but there's something about the facts of death that I want to brace him for.

I rarely hear stories from other people about the day they learned that one day we die. I guess that's because death is one of the last taboos, one of those things we'd rather not talk about. And when death occurs, no one ever really seems prepared for these conversations. No one ever seems to know what to say.

My first real brush with death, that deeply affected me, occurred when I was in fourth grade. I was outside playing and I saw a bird's nest in a low branch. I thought I could get a

stick, lift it up, and lower it down so I could see the little birds. I tried and the nest fell. The little birds spilled to the ground. Horrified at what I had done, I ran to get my parents.

I wept with great, swelling sobs that came from somewhere deep, a place that hadn't ever been tapped before. I kept thinking I was a murderer. My parent reassured me. My dad told me that death isn't something to fear, although he couldn't tell me exactly what it was like. I remember his saying that God takes care of us in death, just as God takes care of us in life. And that in some mysterious way we can't fully imagine, we will even live after we die. He kept talking and I kept crying. What scared me most about death was that I wasn't going to get to do stuff. I remember my parents saying that yes, it is true that everyone dies, but that I had a long full life ahead of me, and that I needn't worry.

He and I have talked about death since then, which I've learned is not that normal. Of course, we're both ministers who have done countless funerals. Most people don't like to talk about death. They'd rather avoid the subject. And that's understandable. But death is a huge reality. So tonight I'm going practice my speech, a speech that some day I'm going to have to give to Nathan. You're welcome to listen in, to overhear, to glimpse over my shoulder.

There are some important things Christians believe about death. These are things that really help us make sense of something so sad. The authors of scripture, the people who wrote down all the stories in the Bible, never underestimated the power of death. They don't pat our heads or offer easy words of assurance saying, "There, there; it'll be alright, it's ok." The Bible knows that death is not friendly and that death is not easily defeated. Instead, the writers recognize that death is a huge reality. That it touches everyone's lives. And they know that death is so enormous and so powerful that only God can overcome it. That's the reason why Easter is the most important Christian holiday. That's why Easter is even more important than Christmas. That's because what happened on that first Easter is now the center of our faith. In Jesus' resurrection, when he rose from the dead, the fearsome enemy – death – was defeated. How? Hang on, I'll get to that in a second. What's important to remember is that even people who follow Jesus and love Jesus, they too will also die. Loving Jesus doesn't protect us from death, but it does allow us to live on. And just like that first Easter, death won't be the end of us either.

So "what happens after we die?" That's a question people have asked for thousands of years. At the time of Jesus, there was group of Jewish leaders called The Sadducees. They didn't believe that people could live after they died. One day they asked Jesus for details about what it would be like when we die. They were trying to trick Jesus. They wanted Jesus to say something that would get him in trouble. So they asked Jesus a trick question "Say that a wife had seven husbands and each of them died. Who would be her husband in the afterlife?" That is a difficult question. But Jesus knew what they were up to. Jesus said, in essence, that it's only a problem if we imagine our future life as being just like this life. He then said that the afterlife will be so different that it will be unlike anything we have ever experienced. We will live like angels, he said. How exactly do angels live? Well, no one really knows, and we can't really imagine such a life.

Do you remember Paul? When the apostle Paul was asked about what happens After we die, he responded by offering a helpful comparison. He said that our life on earth is like a seed of wheat. When we die, it's like the seed gets buried in the earth. What will that buried seed eventually become? It will have a new and different life as a stalk of wheat. If you just look at the seed, you can't tell what the wheat will be like. And if all we ever knew were just seeds -- if we had never seen a field of wheat -- our imaginations couldn't help us anticipate

what wheat looks like. So if you are a seed, and I am a seed, we couldn't possibly imagine what it would be like to live as wheat. When you were really little, and still living inside mommy, you couldn't imagine what life was like outside the womb. And now look! Look at all there is.

I wish the Bible offered more details. But the Bible makes one thing clear. We should be more concerned with *who*, rather than *what*, is beyond the grave. All the writers of The New Testament believe that when we die, we die into the eternal presence of God. In this life, we can experience the presence of God in little glimpses and special moments. After we die, however, we will experience God in a longer and more special way that is different from anything we have experienced in this life. Remember how I told you that God and Jesus are always with us? Well God and Jesus will also greet us in the next life and we will know them in an unmistakable and intimate way.

So in the afterlife, we can be assured that God will be there. And we will be there. I will be Corey, an individual who is loved by God through every stage of my life, and then also in that part that is called death. That's why Paul insists that each of us will be given a new kind of body after we die, much as Jesus appeared to the disciples and followers on Easter in some amazing way that they could only say that he came to them in bodily form. That is the affirmation of our faith. That is what we believe. After all, having a body is part of what makes us distinct individuals. It's the way we experience life, and how we are known by other people. When we die, we don't join some 'universal force' or float around in the ether as disembodied spirits, or anything impersonal like that. The Bible teaches us that we are distinct individuals in the next life, just as we are in this life. Paul calls our afterlife body a 'spiritual body,' a description that still leaves lots of questions unanswered, but a description that makes clear that we will remain distinct individuals, with our individual histories and personalities.

And if God keeps each person safe after death, we can expect to encounter others when we die. On the very sad day when Jesus died, he said to the thief who was crucified next to him, "This day you will be with me in paradise." Now I admit that this is hard to picture. Just like that tricky question about the woman with seven husbands. How could you ever possibly sort out all the interweaving relationships?

Here's another way for me to tell you. With Thanksgiving and Christmas coming up, I've been remembering past holidays. When I try to remember a particular holiday, a large number of people show up in my brain. Many Thanksgivings, and every Christmas Day evening we would drive into Boston to Uncle George and Aunt Margaret's house. But sometimes when I try to remember, all the tenses get confused in my mind. My mom, dad, sister and brother are all there. And there's Uncle George carving the turkey, and Aunt Margaret is singing Christmas carols at the piano, and Nanny is sitting there, quietly out of the way snacking holiday nuts. And you are playing on the floor nearby. But you never met them because they died before you were born. But in this Christmas of my memory all the scattered pieces of life are somehow put back together. And it's in a way that would never be possible at any "real" Christmas. When I remember these past Thanksgivings and Christmases it's like I catch a fragmentary glimpse, a little peek, into the afterlife. In heaven, just like in my jumbled memories, people are united with God and reunited with one another. The tenses get all confused, which I guess means that we are finally free from the constraints of time. Death no longer has the power to separate the generations of our family. There, we will be together in ways that are impossible in this lifetime, and that we can only barely approach in our dreams.

Now some people try to tell me that all this is just wishful thinking, that I really want it to be so, so I imagine it. But this is what mom and I really believe about God. If God cares for

each and every unique individual in a uniquely individual way, then God will not carelessly throw a treasured individual into oblivion. Sometimes you have tossed out a toy in which you outgrew or no longer had lost interest. But we aren't God's toys. We are God's beloved children. Have you heard the expression, "it's too good to be true"? Well, when we believe in a God who has the power to raise Jesus from the dead, and when we believe in a God who values each of us as if there were only one, then eternal life is simply too good *not* to be true.

I wish I had more details for you buddy. All I know for sure is that our faith teaches that God will be there and that we will be there as individual personalities. And that's good enough for me to know for now. And I can leave the details to God. My job now is not to worry, but live my life as best as I can, to love God and Jesus with all my heart, and mommy too, to respond in wonder love and praise. Thanks be to God.