

“From Life Through Death”

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Luke 9:21-24, 51; John 14

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We are on the second Sunday of Lent—4 more to go until Holy Week. Lent is the 40 days plus Sundays countdown to Good Friday and to Easter.

I was struck by the verse from Luke 9:51 that reads: “*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem*”. In other words, he started walking towards and preparing for his death.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus starts dropping hints to his disciples that he is going to suffer and die. He tries to prepare his disciples, but they just don’t get it. They don’t understand. How could they? They were surrounded by life, so how could they possibly think about death? So many amazing things were happening: people were being set free and healed and forgiven; they were flooded with new, abundant life. Jesus was just so full of life that even a hint of death made no sense—there just wasn’t room for it.

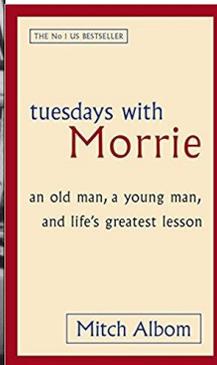
But Jesus knew what was ahead. *Jesus understood that for the world to experience real life, he had to go through suffering and death.*

Lent is our time to prepare for another commemoration of Good Friday and the love shown on the cross. It is also a time to look at our own mortality. If you’ve ever been to the Ash Wednesday service which starts Lent, you will know that we have the ritual of marking people’s foreheads with a cross, while the minister says something like: “From dust you were created and to dust you will return”.

What does it mean to face our own mortality? How do we prepare? We all know with our head that we will die. The two things we can count on in life are death and taxes. But we don’t like to think about death. We know we will eventually die, but a lot of the time we don’t believe it — or, more accurately, we just don’t want to think about it. We’d much rather think about taxes.

You know the old joke about two teenage boys who played baseball and were just obsessed with the game? One day when they were just playing catch, one said to the other “Do you think there’s baseball in heaven?” The other boy replied that he didn’t know, but he sure hoped so. He just couldn’t imagine an eternity without baseball. Well tragedy struck and the one boy was hit by a car and died. His best friend was devastated. Not long after, his friend appeared to him in a dream and he said to him: “There’s good news and bad news. The really great news is that there is baseball in heaven! The bad news is that you’re pitching for us next Saturday.”

People don’t like to talk about death. “The truth is, once you learn how to die, you learn how to live.” That’s what Morrie said, in the book ‘*Tuesdays with Morrie.*’



I recently heard a podcast where Mitch Albom was interviewed. Mitch is the author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, and it took me back to that wonderful book. It's 21 years old now, but still as relevant as ever. The book is based on a true story of a professor who is dying of

ALS, and one of his students, Mitch, who spends 16 Tuesdays with him, listening and recording his wisdom.

Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live. In other words, facing our mortality helps us to live better lives. People who are in the process of preparing for their own death go through a series of letting some things go and picking other things up. We let go of what is temporal, and we pick up more of what is eternal. The truth is that if we learned to do that throughout our lives, we would live lives that are more filled with peace and love, with far less fear and anxiety over little things that just don't matter.

When we really do think about our mortality, we start to think differently and even live differently. You see that in people who know they are dying. Cliff Hauswirth, who spoke to us about a month ago, certainly has that kind of clarity. Knowing he was dying changed him and his outlook on life. It has a way of making clear what really matters and what does not. He has said with honesty that this past year has been the best of his life. I believe him.

In the book, Morrie recommends the practice of picturing a little bird on your shoulder and daily asking the bird "Is today the day? Is today the day that I will die?" Now I think that might be a bit much — I wouldn't bother doing laundry if today was the day. But what if we asked "Is this the year?" That has a little more probability and a little more scope to make some changes. If you knew this was your last year, what would you do? How would you live?

One of your answers probably wouldn't be "buy more things!" In fact, if you knew you were going to die within the year, you would likely want to give away some of your stuff. I think it would be a really good annual Lenten practice to make an effort to reduce clutter and give things away. Our lives are filled with stuff that we don't need and that we clearly can't take with us. What if you gave away or somehow got rid of one thing a day throughout Lent? When we live with an awareness of the end of this life, we live more simply. Yes, we need some things to live, but most of us have an over-abundance of stuff and it doesn't make us happy. Having too much around you stresses you out. As much as possible: try to give things away or recycle them.

Do you remember when the rich young ruler comes to Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life? Jesus asks him if he has followed the

commandments: do not murder or commit adultery, do not steal or bear false witness, honor your father and mother. The young man says he has followed all of these since his youth. Then the Bible says:

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” (Mark 10: 21-22)

Jesus didn't say this to the young man to punish him. No — it says he loved him. Jesus said it because letting go of stuff and money and following Jesus was exactly what would give him real and full life that can never die, both in this life and after death.

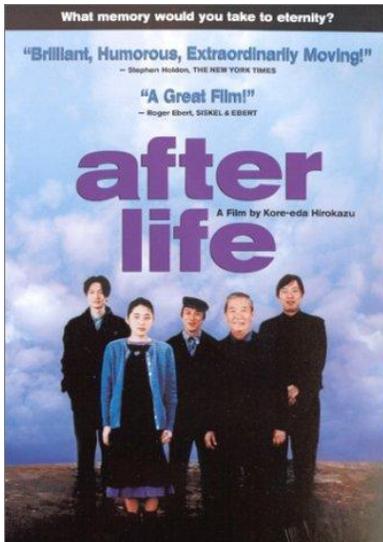
Enjoy the things that you have, *but do not cling to things, and do not cling to money*. The security that they give is ultimately an illusion. By letting go of things and giving stuff away, you will find a taste of eternity right here on earth.

Let go of resentments and past hurts. I heard part of an interview yesterday on CBC Radio's *The Next Chapter* with the author of the book called *Forgiveness*. It is one of the books selected for the Canada Reads 2018 competition. I haven't read it yet but I'm going to. It's a book about the author, Mark Sakamoto's grandparents. His grandfather (from the Maritimes) enlisted to fight in World War II. He was captured by the Japanese and put in a Japanese POW camp, where he witnessed and experienced all sorts of horrors. His grandmother, a Japanese Canadian, ended up being interned in Canada as part of the Japanese internship. She lost absolutely everything, because her own country questioned her allegiance. Amazingly, both ended up being able to forgive and move on from incredibly brutal and unjust experiences.

We talk a lot about forgiveness around here, but the author summed it up in a really helpful way. He said “I always thought that forgiveness was transactional — that it involved a give-and-take between two people, and that it is all about the past”. Instead he learned that forgiveness is almost always just about one person: you. You don't need to involve the other person in order to forgive them. You might — but mostly *it is your work* telling the story, naming the hurt and forgiving the person — and then releasing or renewing the relationship. And rather than it being about the past, forgiveness is all about setting you free so you can live fully in present and freely in the future. Sakamoto's grandparents chose not to bring their pain into the future and into their children's lives. They didn't deny it — they forgave the pain and found freedom. Often people want to lay down their own regrets and the hurts of others before they die and I think that is very important. It never ceases to amaze me how that practice can lighten the load and bring relief. But why wait? Don't you want that freedom now?

So let go of stuff and money, let go of resentments and unforgiveness. What should you then pick up? Pick up and pack your life with gratitude. Though Morrie could no longer go out for a walk, he finds himself appreciating the view from his room more and more. He finds himself filled with gratitude for very simple things. He no longer takes little things for granted. Fill yourself with

gratitude now. You know that nothing brings you into God's presence better than that feeling of gratitude. Actually, I think that love and awe are closely linked to gratitude. It's that feeling of being full of something good. You can't buy that, and it makes life is so much better.



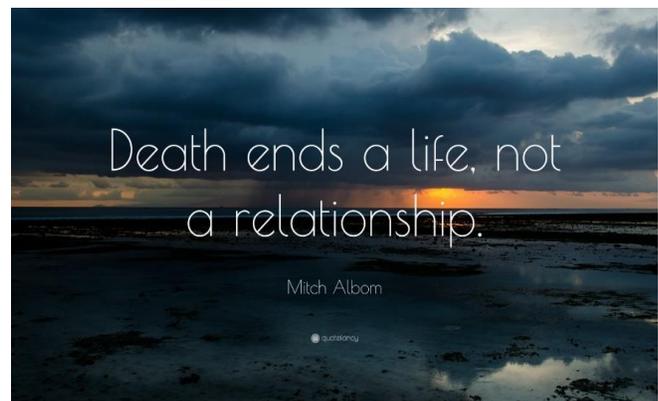
There was a movie I saw a long time ago called 'After Life'. In the movie, when people die, they first go to this institution where they are told that they need to pick one single memory from their life that they will be able take with them into the after life and live forever in that memory. It was a really odd movie and I can't say I even recommend it, but it's the kind of movie that makes you think. You follow all these random characters as they try to decide on a memory. Inevitably they go through all these exciting, mountain-top experiences, but they struggle to choose one. One man brags about all these hot women he's been with throughout his life but then at the end of the movie the memory he ends up choosing to live in forever is a

memory of him sitting quietly on a park bench next to his wife. It is so unexpected. It is the most boring uneventful memory, but when it came down to it, that's what meant the most to him — that time of peace and simple togetherness with his wife.

I think when we face our mortality; the simple and beautiful moments of life become the most important.

Relationships become more important. Some of them anyway. I think facing our mortality also gives us clarity in that area too. I think we begin to realize that some relationships are not very life-giving and perhaps should be let go ... but others should be deepened. If you knew you had a year to live, what relationships would you want to deepen? Who would you want to spend more time with? Maybe it's a grandchild or a sibling or other family member, but perhaps it's a friend.

We can't take the people we love with us, but there is something about relationships that is eternal. As Morrie says "*Death ends a life, not a relationship*". That is especially true of Christians. We believe that our loved ones who have passed on before us are alive in God's house and in God's hands. That does not mean that there won't be pain. There is great pain in grief and loss, but in a way, the relationship and the memories do not



end. And the separation we have from our loved ones is temporary. I really believe that.

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem”. Jesus could prepare for death because he understood what the disciples did not. The disciples understood after, when they met the Risen Christ, that the secret of life came through facing and experiencing death. Death is no longer the end. As we pass from life through death and into eternal life, death is only the passageway to eternal and abundant life.

“Everyone knows they’re going to die,’ he said again, ‘but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently.” — Morrie from *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

This Lent, let us also set our faces towards our mortality, so that by the power of the Risen Christ, we will find life.