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Tickets to Heaven

Philippians 1:15-26

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

John 14:1-7

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God^[a]; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.”

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know^[b] my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

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The John 14 passage that we heard today is a very common scripture that is often read at funerals. And while many of us have been in a worship service that celebrates someone's life, there are a lot of issues about the end of life and our deaths that are very important for Christians to think about. I know that Christians in this room have had loved ones on the edge of death, and they have asked themselves questions like, "How much pain and suffering is too much?" "When is it ok to simply do nothing and let a person die?" And, "How many of our limited resources are we to spend for a very minimal chance of this person being able to return to a productive life?"

For pastors and Christians living 100 years ago, these questions would be much less complicated. Then, there were less interventions available for people who were dying. But with our modern medical technology and all of the machines that we have developed; it is now entirely possible for us to keep someone alive in a persistent vegetative state for months or even years, possibilities that create grey areas in our understandings of life and death and that throw up big ethical questions that keep us up at night.

Some of you will perhaps remember the tragic case of Karen Ann

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Quinlan. In 1975, Karen was 21 years old and she moved out of her parent's house into an apartment with her friends in Morris Township, New Jersey. Trying to fit into a particular dress, Karen went on a radical fasting diet for a couple of days and didn't eat much of anything. That night, Karen went out to the bar with her friends to celebrate her friend's birthday. She drank a couple of Gin and Tonics and took a valium and also an opiate, Dextropropoxyphene. Because she began feeling faint, her friends acted responsibly and they took Karen home and sent her to bed. But when the friends checked on Karen 15 minutes later, she had stopped breathing. They immediately called an ambulance and attempted mouth to mouth resuscitation. While color returned to Karen's cheeks, she would not regain consciousness. For nine days Karen was in a coma at one hospital. When everything the doctors tried could not bring her out, they transferred her to a larger facility with better equipment. For the next several months, Karen remained in a coma and slowly lost weight, dropping from 115 to 80 pounds. Believing that she was slowly dying, Karen's parents came to the conclusion that their daughter was beyond hope, and they decided to remove their daughter from the ventilator. However, the Morris county prosecutor opposed this action and he threatened to bring homicide charges against the Quinlan family if Karen's ventilator would be removed.

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A bitter legal battle ensued that went all the way up to the New Jersey Supreme Court. Finally, a year after her tragic collapse, the Jersey court ruled that the Quinlan family had the authority to remove their daughter Karen from the ventilator. With great sadness, they did so. To everyone's surprise, Karen began to breathe on her own, but because of her extensive brain damage, she would never again regain consciousness. Karen lived for nine more years in a persistent vegetative state, being nourished by a feeding tube.

There are two different and completely opposing points of view that Christians hold concerning life and end of life issues. The two points of view can be viewed as being opposite each other on spectrum or a continuum. On the one end, we have the perspective of a person who values the gift of life so much that they believe that there should be no end or no limit to the resources spent or to the measures taken in order to extend and promote life. To their way of thinking, life itself has intrinsic value which is greater than any financial or material resources. In this view, it is the existence of life that is important, and there is very little value given to the quality of that life, simply it's quantity or the increasing the length of time that life is lived.

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On the other end of the spectrum, there is the person who values the quality of life and who measures and weighs the quality of life against the cost of the resources that must be spent to obtain it. From this point of view, it is not enough to be alive, one must be able to enjoy the living of life. For a person from this perspective, they may determine that it may not be worth the pain and suffering to live if that life would only be spent in a hospital room

These two very extreme points of view have very different perspectives about life. For the one person, life is considered innately valuable and sacred in it's own right, and for the other person, a life is considered as but one resource among many to which humanity are to be stewards. And because these two perspectives have no common ground between them, it is virtually impossible for these two Christians to agree to what should be given priority and what should be given more value: It is at it's simplest, simply reduced to an eternal debate of quantity vs. quality.

But rather than simply shrug our shoulders and give up on this task of reconciling the two different Christian perspectives, I would like to suggest that there are at least three principles which are valuable for both sides to take into consideration when concerning end of life issues.

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These three principles are: the existence of heaven. Acting out of a motivation of love and making your decisions as a part of a community.

The first point is one that all Christians need to be reminded of occasionally. As believers in Jesus Christ, we also believe that there is eternal life after death. As Christians, we all believe that this life, our sitting and standing and breathing the air of this planet is NOT all that there is. We believe in heaven. We believe in a life after this in another dimension, when we will at last be with Jesus and all of the cares and concerns and aches and pains of our broken bodies from this world will be no more. And because we believe that there is something good that happens to us after this life on earth; we do not need to be afraid of death or to make our decisions about the end of life in fear.

While it is normal to be afraid of the unknown and to be unsure about what will happen to you after you die, as Christians we do not need to be afraid that this life is simply the end all and be all of everything. Sometimes if someone is really struggling with the end of life what may be really going on is a struggle of faith. --An internal unspoken doubt about the existence of heaven and about eternal life after death. If you are afraid that this life is all that there is, then it would be logical to try to preserve this life at all

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costs. But if you have a little bit of faith that there is life after death, and that heaven is for real, then you no longer need to be so terribly afraid of what comes next after you die. You can begin to respond in faith and in the love of God instead of in fear.

The second principle, which all Christians need to keep in mind when thinking about end of life issues is the principle which guides all of our lives. We are to love God with all of heart, all of our soul, all of our minds and all of our strength, and we are to love others as well as we love ourselves. This concept is simple to say and also extremely difficult to do. It is difficult to think about and to be honest with ourselves about our own needs and our own motives. But by thinking about the love that exists between the person that is dying and ourselves we can sometimes get at the deeper questions that may have gone unanswered. We can ask if we would like the person to remain alive more for our own needs, or if they loved life and the living it and would like their life and relationship with us to continue. By bringing our relationship to the person who is dying into focus, we can ask how much dying or living would harm or help a person or their family. For example, the questions that people may ask themselves concerning letting a loved one go would include: "I am keeping a person alive due to my needs, or is it for their own sake?" A person can ask themselves "What

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would this dying person want or need me to do for them?” “Would the resources of time, money and energy that would need to be spent in order to keep them alive be helpful or harmful to the well being of the family?” Or “Would the continued time they would spend on this earth be something that would strengthen relationships and be valuable in the greater circles of family and the community?”

The final principle to keep in mind is that decisions concerning the end of life are good to make in community. Every family has people with different perspectives and different levels of tolerance for the dying process. For some people any time spent in a hospital is thought to be worse than living while others do not mind being in medical care so much. For some people Hospice care is considered completely giving up while to others, it is simply an acceptance of the inevitable and universal end of all life. While everyone has their own perspectives and tolerances concerning questions of death, what is most important to remember is the point of view of the person who is dying. It is important to ask the questions in the family and in the community and to remember any conversations that people had concerning the dying process. Did the dying person’s perspectives on these issues change over time, due to their experiences with someone else who was dying, or did their feelings remain constant over the course of

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their life? Was there ever at some point a living will or a letter of some type written out with their instructions about their own death, and has it been recently updated? With all of these questions being asked in a community, people from various points of view can perhaps come together, express all of their feelings and begin to reach a decision on how to proceed. They can have someone hear their perspective and feelings and help them to begin to think about their loss. But without the community coming together to dialogue and to care for each other, the relationships that were forged in life cannot be helpful in the process of dying well.

In conclusion, while Christians have a great number of perspectives on when to end life and to embrace death and to enter into eternal life; we can know that there is one thing that is true. Our God loves us and promises to be with us not only on this earth, but also in heaven. The love of our God is complete and perfect and is a model or a template for the love that we are to show each other, both in our living and our dying; and finally, it is in our relationships and in our community that we both live and die best. May we strengthen and grow those relationships with each other as we serve our risen Christ. Amen.