"A Good Life and a Good Death,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on February 5, 2012

Do you know the book Tuesdays With Morrie? It's about a man named Morrie Schwartz who is dying of ALS, or Lou Gehrig 's disease, and the conversations he has with his former student, Mitch Albom. Mitch visits Morrie on Tuesdays, like they when they were student and teacher at Brandeis. These are not sympathy visits--they are a chance for Morrie to share what he's learning about dying and about living.

Early in the book Morrie says, "Everyone knows they're going to die, but nobody believes it." He says he used to be optimistic; before he got ALS, he liked to think he was going to be the healthiest old man around. He tells Mitch about a Buddhist teaching that's a more realistic approach; that says we should live our lives acting like there is a little bird sitting on our shoulder, reminding us that we are mortal. Every day, you ask that bird, "Is today the day? Am I ready? Am I doing all I need to do? Am I being the person I want to be? Is today the day that I die?" [1]

How would things be different if you and I did that every day? If I asked, every day, "Is today the day that I die?," I would worry less about the small things. I would pay more attention to the present moment. I would pay better attention to those I love.

Forrest Church, longtime minister of All Souls Church in New York City, until he died of cancer two years ago, said religion is "our human response to being alive and having to die." Too often, I think, religion focuses on the question of what happens after we die, which no one knows the answer to, not on this side of the grave. Good religion helps us to face our mortality and helps us to live good lives in the knowledge of our certain death.

That's one of the things I love about the church--that it's a place where there's relative comfort with death. When someone dies, we know what to do. We come together to cry and to laugh, to mourn and to celebrate. To draw near to what it would be easy to turn away from.

When someone lights a candle here and tells us that one they love had died, or is dying, and asks for our prayers and support, this is a reminder that death will come, not only to that person, but to you and to me. In a culture that runs away from death, that tends to deny it at every turn, we need to be reminded.

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[1] Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 81.

And we need ways to touch with the earthy, physical reality of life and death. You may think me strange, but I like funerals and memorial services. And I like going to the cemetery, and being out under the open sky. I like the ritual of picking up a handful of earth and dropping it into the grave. I like getting that dirt on my hands.

When someone dies, we gather around the family, often here in this sanctuary. We sing and we say prayers and we tell stories, to remember and bless the one who has died. But you know, don't you, that funerals and memorial services are not for the dead? They are for the living. We show up to remember and honor one who has died, but more importantly, to companion the grieving. There's a lovely poem about this, called, "What I Learned From My Mother." Here's part of it:

I learned to attend viewings even if I didn't know
the deceased, to press the moist hands
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.[2]

If there is anything I have learned in ministry, it is this. That at times of grief and loss, what you say doesn't matter that much. What anyone will remember is that you came.

When you show up for a funeral or memorial service, you are not there just for others. You are there to attend to your own grief, and to your own mortality. Later this month, on Ash Wednesday, people will go to church and will hear these words from the book of Genesis: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We need to remember this. That we are human, of the earth, and to the earth we will return.

When that day comes, will you be ready? The way to prepare for death is by getting started now. It's easy to procrastinate about this, but it's not a good idea. A friend of mine told me about his father, who in his last years, went back to religion, as he finally began to face the idea of his own mortality. Seeing his dad trying to play catch-up, my friend said, "He's cramming for final exam."

A better way is to start now, contemplating your own mortality. Like Morrie, picture that little bird on your shoulder. Start asking that question, "Is this the day I am going to die?" Make a practice of living with the knowledge of your own death.

There are some practical and tangible steps you can take. Make out a will, which articulates your intentions for what will happen to your belongings after you die. Consider the church. :) Create a living will, or advance directives, that outline what kind of medical care you want, and what you don't want. And make a funeral or memorial service plan. Think about favorite hymns you'd like us to sing, or readings that have been meaningful to you, and if you want to be buried or cremated, and where your remains will go. I'd be glad to have a conversation with you about this, and to keep a file of this information if you'd like me to have it. I'm not suggesting you figure out

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[2] Julia Kasforf, "What I Learned From My Mother," available online at http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/178168

all the details ahead of time. Your loved ones will need to have something to do when you're gone, and the service will be for them. So they should have some say in this too. But it will help them to know what your hopes and desires are.

After the service today our Parish Nurses are offering to help you with these things, by leading a conversation on end of life issues, and the decisions and responsibilities involved. You're invited to join them at noon in the Ladies Parlor. Sometime soon I will offer a similar forum to help you start thinking about your funeral or memorial service plans.

Death is never easy, and some deaths are better than others. Not all deaths are peaceful or good. I know that. How do you make sense of a suicide or the death of a child? How do you make peace when you never got the chance to say goodbye? It's hard. We don't have control over all these things. What we do have is our faith that love is stronger even than death. I know this to be true.

A good death is one in which you are aware of your mortality, and accepting of it; you are able to make choices, and have those choices respected. You have access to emotional and spiritual support, and hospice care and pain control. A good death is one in which you have the time to say goodbye to your family and friends, and you are at peace when it is time to go.[3]

You might find all this talk of death and dying to be morbid and depressing. But I don't experience it that way. It's a paradox--being in touch with your own mortality can help you to live a more whole and happy and helpful life. We live in a world that tiptoes around death so much, I find it refreshing and liberating when people confront it head on. I remember a conversation I had with a member of the pastoral staff where I did hospital chaplaincy training. A number of people on my floor were dying, and this person, a Catholic woman, encouraged me to help their families let them die with as much peace and dignity as possible. "Sometimes I get frustrated," she said, "that no one seems to die around here! We put them on a ventilator and a feeding tube and send them off to a place of limbo because we are afraid to let them die!"

I'm not saying death is easy. But it's a part of life. It's something that we will all experience, and not something we need to fear. The trouble with death is that it's so final--the end of our time on this sweet earth.

The folk singer Phil Ochs wrote a song about this. Here are a couple of verses:

There's no place in this world where's I'll belong when I'm gone
And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone
And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

And I won't breathe the bracing air when I'm gone
And I can't even worry 'bout my cares when I'm gone
Won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone

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[3] See "Twelve Principles of a Good Death," available online at http://dying.about.com/od/deathdyingandculture/qt/gooddeath.htm

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

The way to have a good life is to live in the knowledge of your own death. To be acquainted with the reality that you don't have all the time in the world. And to let this knowledge give your life a richness and an urgency. A reminder that each day is a gift. An appreciation for the beauty of this world. And gratitude for those lives which touch your own, and companion you on your way.

Contemplating death, the poet says,

I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.[4]

Twelve years ago I listened to Tuesdays With Morrie on tape, in my car. As the ending got closer, there were days I didn't put that tape in. I knew how it was going to end, and I wasn't ready.

At that time, a man in my church was dying of cancer. His name was Roger, and we'd been in a prayer group together. One day, I took him to the optometrist to get his glasses fixed. A frugal Yankee, he'd been holding them together with tape. The person behind the counter said, "I can do a temporary repair, but you really ought to get yourself some new ones. This isn't going to last." Roger said, "That's okay. I'm not going to need them much longer."

Right before he died, he invited the men's group he was part of to spend some time at his bedside. I wasn't in that group, so I never got to say goodbye. He was here, and then he was gone.

I learned that life is not like a cassette player--there is no pause button. I learned what I still need to be reminded of--that life is fleeting, and none of us know how much time we have; that life calls us to be awake to this day--to the wonder and beauty and pain and blessing of it. To know that one day you and I will be gone, so we'd better live our lives as best we can. Let's live our lives right now, while we're here.

Amen.

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[4] These lines are from the morning's reading, the poem "When Death Comes," by Mary Oliver.