

**All Saints Sunday
November 7, 2021
Southampton, Ma**

Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9

A few years ago, I had a hospice patient who decided to stop her dialysis treatments. I think she was in her late 70s, maybe early 80s. When I arrived, her son was there. The conversation I had with her was for his benefit too.

I wanted to be sure she was clear that forgoing dialysis would hasten her death. I asked her why, and she replied that she had no other options given her cancer treatments had ended without success. She knew death was inevitable, and she was comfortable with that.

“What makes this decision comfortable?” I asked. “I get to see my husband again. I’ll see my brother-in-law, and I’ll see my parents,” she replied. I had a couple more questions and then allowed her to ask me questions to allay any uncertainty she might have had. After our conversation, I turned to her son and asked him if he was comfortable with his mother’s decision. He was.

The other day a colleague who has a parishioner on hospice called me. Her parishioner decided that she will stop eating on December 1. It distressed my colleague and the patient’s sister, who is also a member of the congregation. I said that her parishioner has a right to stop eating and that to try to dissuade her was not supportive.

Although Massachusetts doesn’t allow it, where physician-aided dying is legal, some terminally ill people will get a prescription that once self-administered they will die. They can choose their death date. Many people will die, however, without using it, which leads me to believe that they wanted the prescription because it gave them a sense of control, similar to the woman who wants to stop eating.

While some people believe that there is nothing after death, most people believe there is an afterlife. As Christians, communion ritually expresses this belief. Many people, even non-Christians, believe in heaven, even though astronomers have never found a specific location for it. Personally, I don't believe there is a place called heaven, although I do believe that upon our deaths, we enter God's everlasting love and care. I also believe that we will reunite with our loved ones who have died.

While we can speculate and spend lots of time trying to grasp afterlife, what does death mean to us now? What does it mean beyond the cessation of life?

Life is finite because we die. Death gives life its value and meaning. Some may see death as a release from the pressures and the anxieties of this world. Death, then, is the ultimate peace. Others, and I'm one of them, believe that when we truly accept death we will live more richly and fully.

For me, life is a gift, or maybe I'd be more accurate to say that living is a gift. Over the past decade, I've become more grateful for simple moments, which in the past I might have ignored. On Friday morning during my walk, I stopped for a moment to gaze and marvel at all the constellations across the clear, still-night sky because within minutes dawn's light would wash them out. I find things that once really bugged me, like sitting in traffic, don't, because I can't do anything about it. I find I'm more forgiving and willing to cut people more slack.

I just passed ten years in hospice chaplaincy. Death is never far away. I've worked with patients like the woman who wanted to stop dialysis. I've experienced wonder, such as the woman who, during her last ten days of life was basically non-responsive, died in the early hours of her 60th wedding anniversary with her husband in the next room. I have experienced the profound shift that families experience when they were at bedside at the time of death.

Death humbles us. Death reminds us that to believe we can control life is an illusion. We should remember, though, that death is not only an end; it is a beginning too.

Whether we believe in an actual heaven or God's eternal love and care or that mortal life is an interruption of life that exists before birth and after death, when we honor the dead by saying their names, by seeing their picture, by telling their stories, remembering their nuggets of wisdom, they live on. They are immortal as they reside in our memory and the community's. They live on because our love for them does not let them die.

When Jesus talked about eternal life, he referred to a life of peace, shalom, which begins in this world and continues into the next. Mortal life, then, is short in the span of eternity. Thus, savor each moment, give thanks for small gestures. Have humility. Let love and compassion be our North Star.