



The American Heritage Dictionary defines death as, "*The act of dying; the termination of life; extinction*". Death is not a word for polite dinner conversation nor is it a word that we in the church like to talk much about. And that's too bad. Who better to talk of death than the followers of the One who himself experienced death and was raised to new life? Who better to talk of death than those in the church who confess that Easter is real; That Jesus did not stay dead?

So why do we tremble with dread and fear when we hear the words "death" and "church" used in the same sentence? I think the church has been descending toward death for a very long time now: Not just over the last 30 years with attendance decline, but since about 325 CE when Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Empire.

In her book, The Great Emergence, Phyllis Tickle puts it another way.

"Arguably, one of the most potentially destructive things that can happen to a faith is for it to become the accepted and established religion of the political, cultural, and social unit in which its adherents live" (p.161).

My take on this? Religion is the cancer of faith. The moment faith became institutionalized, it ceased to be a verb and instead became a proper noun; "the church". People of "The Way" were now called "Christians". People of faith now became people of church whose vision no longer extended to the coming of God's Kingdom but instead to the parochial preservation of a structure. Over time, the church had to be preserved and God had to be controlled at all costs. Hence, centuries of crusades and bloodshed followed.

Do we really think for a moment that Jesus intended to start a new religion? The word "Christian" never once came out of this Jewish man's mouth and in fact didn't come about until many years later.

A long time ago, some of the very first followers of the crucified and resurrected Jesus gathered together on a daily basis and "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers*" (Acts 2:42). And as if that were not enough time together, they gathered at other times throughout the week in peoples' homes breaking bread and eating food "*with glad and generous hearts, praising God*" (Acts 2:46-7) Not only did these early followers of Jesus have all things in common, but "*they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need*" (Acts 2:45).

This is all we're told about the earliest gathering of Jesus' followers. Maybe that's all we need to know. Maybe following Jesus has less to do with preserving institutions and more to do with nourishing relationships. Maybe following Jesus has nothing to do with religion where I seek to control God and instead has everything to do with faith: trusting that Jesus will lead me into right relationships of love and peace with God and the world.

As a follower of Jesus named and claimed by God in the waters of Baptism, I will not be seduced by the Church or any institution claiming to have God in its back pocket and demanding my allegiance to it; for that is the way of death. But I will follow Jesus into the places of deepest darkness. I will follow Jesus into the neighborhoods of profound brokenness. I will even follow Jesus into the valley of the shadow of death. But not before I gather with you in prayer, praising God, breaking bread and sharing all things in common with glad and generous hearts. Breaking bread, praising God, sharing all things in common? I'll do that with you any day of the week: Even by Zoom!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! And we are too! Alleluia!

Peace and Love,
Pastor Doug