

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**  
**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • JANUARY 12, 2020 • EPIPHANY**  
**GUIDING LIGHT SERIES**

**The Litany**  
**Based on Psalm 29**

*Name the power of God!*

We find glory, strength, splendor, and power,  
all wrapped like light around the darkness.

*Name the power of God!*

In the seen and unseen, the remembered and anticipated,  
the certain and the mysterious, we find the markings of the Spirit.

*Let us pray:*

Open us to every sign of your presence, O God; here, there, everywhere. Amen.

**The Scripture**  
**1 Corinthians 15:35-38; 42-50**

*But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.*

*So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*

**The Message**  
***Guiding Light: Death***  
**Mark Briley**

Synopsis: 31,256. That's the number of Starbucks in the world... for now. The world is enamored with a pricey cup of coffee, free Wi-Fi, and a chance to people watch from a sidewalk patio. A new movement, albeit otherwise focused, is forming in the world of sidewalk cafes. They're called Death Cafés. It sounds macabre. It's not part of the Goth culture. It's not a fringe gaming movement for those fixated on darkness and the netherworld. A Death Café is a gathering point for discussions about death. In a death-defying culture, it's important to understand death so that we can begin to appreciate the reality of life to which death is but a portal. Is there a guiding light to be found even in the darkness of death?



I'm guessing all of you woke up this morning excited to get to worship today. I hope so, anyway. And I'm guessing as that smile spanned your face when you woke up and realized it's Sunday, and you get to come to church that your first thought was, "*I sure hope the sermon's about death today!*" Anyone? No? That surprises me. Not really, I guess.

Death's not anyone's favorite subject unless you're talking zombies or sci-fi stuff or getting ready to watch *Law & Order* – people seem drawn to death then. But otherwise, you probably envision a number of other more uplifting topics you'd prefer to consider this morning... like five simple tips to achieve your New Year's Resolutions. Someone shared with me the easiest way to do that this week by sharing a cartoon that said: "*Achievable New Year's Resolutions, 2020: 1. Get Older. 2. Gain weight. 3. Do stuff. 4. Drink coffee. 5. Try not to die.*"

Maybe that's how to get us to actually talk about death – discovering how to avoid it altogether. Would you believe, however, that the trend is actually moving the other direction? It's true. A new movement is getting quite intentional about the conversation. They've created Death Cafes, and the movement is growing.

If you're like me, your first thought is, "*What?!?! Death Cafes? That sounds terrible.*" Maybe the café part is the draw. Sidewalk cafes are all the rage anymore.

In 1971, a little place called Starbucks opened in Seattle. Perhaps you've heard of it. Last I checked, there are 31,256 Starbucks in the world. They tend to open so quickly, a satirical cartoon announced that a new Starbucks was set to open in the bathroom of an existing Starbucks. We seem enamored with a pricey cup of coffee, free Wi-Fi and a chance to be around other people working, conversing, meeting, or simply walking down the sidewalk.

Howard Schultz, who created Starbucks as we know it, had this vision to create a Third Place for people to gather. His thought was that most people have a home, a place of work, and then had need and room in their life for a Third Place. He was determined to create such a place. It was his version of *Cheers* because sometimes you wanna go? (*Where everybody knows your name*).

There have been plenty of church growth books that have centered around Schultz's creation of a third place. But that's for another day, another conversation. We get it...Starbucks has succeeded.

But what is this Death Café nonsense? It sounds so morbid, or at least, very dark and sad. The Death Café<sup>1</sup> began in England ten years ago. It may sound like a place for the dying, but the opposite is actually the intent. It's designed to help people make the



most out of their lives through a greater awareness of death. There are now more than 900 regular Death Café events taking place in 19 countries across the world where people simply come together and talk about heavy topics over light refreshments. I couldn't find an active Death Café being held here in Columbia, but Google says we've had them here before – one at The Upper Crust next to Murry's a few years back.

Every meeting begins with cake and a question: "*Why are you here?*" The unscripted discussion flows from that single question. The cafes are not designed to be grief support groups though it is sometimes grief of such loss that brings people to the cafes initially.

It was certainly the case for Linda Potter. In the span of four years, she lost a close aunt to brain cancer, her father to colon cancer, and her nephew to drowning as the

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<sup>1</sup> The primary source of Death Café information shared throughout this message came from the following work: Newquist, Gusti Linnea. "*The Death Café phenomenon: Millennials are dying to talk about dying.*" *Presbyterians Today*, April/May 2018, 22-23. A second source can be found here: <https://www.npr.org/2013/03/08/173808940/death-cafes-breathe-life-into-conversations-about-dying>

result of a seizure. She started to channel her grief through her work as a retreat coach. Her driving question? *"How do you want to live, knowing you are going to die?"* Linda heard about the Death Café movement on National Public Radio, and she decided to lead one at her Presbyterian church in New York. She recruited participants from nearby colleges, one that offers a mortuary science major. She has cultivated quite a strong following in the past four years of starting this movement in her area. She's been particularly amazed by the interest of Millennials.

She told about one occasion where a couple college students showed up for a Café. They intended to leave at intermission but decided to stay after hearing the story of a veteran with stage III cancer. They recognized they had much they could glean from listening to others, and sharing themselves, thoughts about death. Potter said, *"As we become more comfortable in talking about our death, we become more alive in our living."*

This sounds a lot like the Apostle Paul to me, who said in our focal passage for today, *"Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies."* The translation of this verse by one scholar and theologian reads, *"I pity the fool who thinks death is the end game."* That scholar of course none other than Mr. T. Of course.

Paul was guiding a people in a faith-filled conversation. We would do well to remember that. He's talking about things with these folks that no one really knows anything about. He's not teaching a science class. He's talking faith. He's using the best of his human limitations with words and descriptions to describe something otherworldly. It's every preacher's hindrance. We're so limited. You want to know about heaven, and all I can tell you is a story about playing a mean game of Spoons with my family on New Year's Eve. I actually love this humbling quote by Barbara Brown Taylor that says, *"Being ordained is not about serving God perfectly, but about serving God visibly, allowing other people to learn whatever they can from watching you rise and fall."*

I think this extends to our sense of insufficiency as witnesses of our Christian faith. We think, *"I don't know what to say about my faith. I don't know how to influence others for Christ."* But we are... every day, all the time. How do we rise and fall? How do we handle defeat? How do we respond to suffering? Our own as well as the suffering of others? This all matters.

So, here's Paul writing this letter of course, but let's imagine it as though he is giving his best shot at hosting a Death Café where people are saying, *"Okay... so there's a resurrection of the body. Great. But what kind of body will it be?"* It's like people are putting in requests, always concerned with the tangible. *"Will I look like a Hemsworth Brother or Barbara Walters or Pauly Shore in the resurrection?"* The Apostle Paul says, *"No, no, no. It's not like that. How can I say this?"* He says, *"I can't draw you a diagram or show you a picture. Hmmm. There."* (And he points to a tree in the

background). *“Where did that tree come from?” “Lowe’s!”* some smart aleck yells from the crowd. There’s always at least one. Undeterred, Paul says, *“It started as a simple seed; something so innocent and seemingly insignificant. In fact, it serves little purpose if any until it’s planted. And when it’s planted, it dies. But it rises again, and it does so with a very different kind of body from that of which it was sown.”*

Despite its dissolution and difference, it is the same seed. Paul is saying the same is true of us. Though dissolved by death and changed by resurrection, the essence of our soul is the same...only now we are prepared for the new life for which we were resurrected – to bask in the presence of Christ forever. This is an other-worldly conversation about the afterlife in some ways, but it no less applies to our daily living.

My homiletics professor, Rev. Dr. Dan Moseley, came to an understanding that for any spiritual growth to occur, something must die. That death may be some level of comfort, some embedded belief from our childhood, some sacrifice of material wealth, or some significant loss. Your resolution to get in better physical shape doesn’t come without a loss of calories, a shift in your day to prioritize exercise, etc.

Remember, discipline is just deciding between what you want now and what you want most. Your spiritual health is the same. It’s not simply an add on. It only improves with loss and sacrifice and shift in priorities. Something has to die in order to be resurrected. Author Jonathan Martin says, *“The extent to which we experience death to self is the extent to which we will experience resurrection.”* “But,” we protest, *“I don’t want to go through those losses to experience the gains.”* I get that. Nobody sets out intentionally to *“learn from their mistakes.”* But it’s the falling and rising again cycle that ultimately creates a tree when we can only see the seed.

David Bayles and Ted Orland, in their book *Art and Fear*, tell the story of a ceramics teacher who divided the class into two groups – one group would be graded on how much they created in the designated time, while the other group would be graded on the quality of the one work they made. In the end, it was the “quantity” group that ended up producing the works of most quality. That surprised me at first. But here’s why they concluded such was the case. *“While the ‘quantity’ group was busy churning out piles of work – and learning from their mistakes – the ‘quality’ group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.”*

Rob Bell noted this story and said, *“This isn’t true just for ceramics students.”* He said, *“When I’m meeting with my counselor and I use words like “mistake” or “failure” or “waste,” he stops me. He then reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a sign and holds it up so I can read it – again. The sign simply says: “The God who wastes nothing.”* Bell adds, *“Now it’s absolutely necessary for us to own and name and claim and make amends for our failures and mistakes and sins and wrongs where others are*

*concerned. But to stop there is tragic. It isn't just a failure, a mistake, a sin, a wrong... it's also an opportunity... to grow, expand, evolve, learn."*<sup>2</sup>

Paul seems to be saying the same thing about death and seeds. Do you see the seeds in your pocket as simply idle seeds, or do you think to yourself, "*I've got a pocket full of trees.*" If we don't plant the seeds, we'll never know.

Paul, of course, is focused on this resurrection body. He suggests that in life there is an ongoing progression or development. In the earthly life, we are one with Adam – which literally translates "*human.*" We have the aches and pains and death associated with these flawed and limited shells of ours. But in Christ, we become one with him... a spiritual body that shares in his eternal life... in his very being. Paul says simply of this death and resurrection, "*It will be stunning.*" There is a hope in this narrative that our decaying and disjointed and broken-down vessels will be renewed in such a freeing way. But we're created to have life and life abundantly now. And it's a new year and you're dreaming big about all 2020 can be. How can death be a guiding light? A healthy approach to death always prompts a greater sense of what our lives can be.

Art and Chip Sansom have a comic strip that I'm not really all that familiar with called "*The Born Loser.*" I did see this one, however, that shows a mother leaning over the back of her husband's chair, where he rests with his young son sitting on his lap. "*Have you ever had a near-death experience, Pop?*" asks the son. "*Can't say I have, my boy,*" replied the father. Whereupon the mother intrudes: "*The question is, has he ever had a near-life experience?*"

This is what we're after, yes? We want to live now. We want to be "*in Christ*" now... alive... active in the kingdom work of God now, not just in heaven. To do so will take courage and great intention. It will help us to get a grip on death... not fear it but keep it all in healthy perspective. Given that research suggests the death rate of humans is still hovering right at 100%, we're all going to face it.

The Death Café movement is saying, "*In the face of that reality, how will you live?*" Sometimes, it helps to notice the people around you ,who have gone through significant changes in their lives ,who seem to have an energy and vitality for living. Call them. Set up a time to get together. Ask them to tell you about their losses. They are generally gracious to speak about them, and often it can bring care and healing to them even as they help the rest of us keep loss and change, transition and even death in its most helpful place of perspective.

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<sup>2</sup> The story about Bayles and Orland's experiment with ceramic students and Bell's follow up come from "*Drops Like Stars.*" Rob Bell. Pg. 112-113. HarperOne Publishing. New York. 2009.

Years ago, when musician Warren Zevon appeared on “The Late Show” with David Letterman shortly after finding out he had cancer, Letterman asked him, “*From your*



*perspective, do you know something about life... that I don't know?"* Zevon answered, “*I know how much you're supposed to enjoy every sandwich.*”

There is something in your life right now... something you're struggling with, wrestling with, concerned about, maybe downright fearful of.

How can getting some perspective on that very matter, grant you a new opportunity to see it as a seed... one day producing something bigger and greater than you can possibly see from this vantage point? How can talking about those matters, even the fear of death itself, bring about a new possibility for life? Jon Underwood, the British web designer and self-named “*Death Entrepreneur*” who started the Death Café phenomenon along with his mother, a psychotherapist who helped facilitate says, “*When people sit down to talk about death, the pretense kind of falls away, and people talk very openly and authentically. And... they say things in front of strangers which are really profound and beautiful.*”

“*Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen.*”<sup>3</sup> How will you commit to doing that this year? What the New Year brings to you will depend a great deal on what you bring to the New Year. (Vern McLellan). Maybe we come to 2020 with our willingness to talk about our hopes and fears; get a perspective of death that doesn't keep us from living our lives in Christ that puts out hope and joy and potential into the world.

Paul closes this Death Café he's hosting by saying, “*It all boils down to this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.*” Our physical bodies are only intended to carry us so far as they kindly, or not so kindly, remind us of on a regular basis. Our spirits, however, are getting prepared for an other-worldly reality. Our intentionality around that preparation may make a world of difference in the perspective and joy we can appreciate and experience in the here and now so that even, in death, we can claim the guiding light of Christ as our next move forward. Sow the seeds. There are beautiful trees just waiting to be planted.

So... if someone asks you later today about what the sermon was about, what will you say? Was it about death or was it about life? Well, it's a matter of perspective and, as always, I guess that's up to you.

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<sup>3</sup> From Brene Brown's *Daring Greatly*.