

I suspect that I spend more time than the average person in hospice centers and funeral homes. It's not that I seek out these places but that my work calls me to be there – be there with and for people in times of death, as death approaches and after death has come.

I spend some time last Friday thinking about today's scripture at one such place - a hospice center. I thought about the effort people make to avoid coming there - the effort to avoid death, some more successful than others. My thoughts moved on to the regrets so many people have as they come to the end of their lives, the pain and brokenness that come from poor choices, and their sad awareness that they've not really lived, or that they've lived a life that's false or hurtful, that they've led a life-that-is-death, and feel it's too late to do anything about it. I thought of the pain of many families who've lived with someone who couldn't overcome an addiction or been manipulative, controlling, oppressive, or abusive, and how in many ways they, too, have been forced to live a life-that-is-death.

Nobody wants to live a life-that-is-death. We all want life. So why do so many end without it?

Well, we make choices, choices about what foundation to build our lives upon, choices that we think will be life-giving. And, just as with other kinds of building, where you can have a poured or concrete block basement, a concrete slab, or concrete or wooden piers, there are many kinds of foundations upon which we can try to build a life – popularity, wealth, success, power, or, simply, avoidance of conflict. Often this isn't a conscious decision but a set of assumptions we make, choices we drift into because of things that attract us, or that we fear. And, regardless how we make the choice, as with other kinds of building, the foundation upon which we build a life shapes the life we get. Lives which people build upon popularity, success, wealth, power, or conflict avoidance, will show what's been trusted, show it in the character of the life that's built.

They'll show it in another way, too. They'll show it because whatever “thing” – popularity, success, wealth, power, or conflict avoidance - has been trusted to be the “foundation” will be inadequate for that task. None of the “things” we might choose for a foundation can enhance, much less give life, so the structures, the lives built upon them will not be life giving, and will need to need to be torn down.

That's not because we're unsuccessful in our “life-building.” We may be very successful. Trusting in and building our lives on power may make us very powerful. Trusting in and building on wealth may get us lots of money. What the world sees of what we “build” may be very impressive.

But what gets built will still need to come down. Need to come down so that a new life, built on a different kind of foundation, can begin, so that a real life, a life-that-is-life, can be lived!

Sounds harsh, doesn't it? But that's what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel, where he shocks his disciples by saying that the temple will be destroyed, and that this awful, seemingly bad news, is actually good news, because it brings new birth, and the promise of new life.

I remember the birth of my children. That sure was good news! Nothing could be more wonderful. I'll never forget it. That's why one of my favorite parts of ministry is visiting parents who've just been blessed with a newborn, holding that little bundle of new life. That's wonderful, too!

And yet, Jesus speaks of the destruction of the temple as “birth,” as “good news.” How can that be?

The temple was the heart of Israel's life. The Jews had lost a lot in the Roman occupation, but they

still had the temple. For them, this awesome structure was the center of the earth.

But Jesus said it would be utterly destroyed. And he called that bad news, good news. Why?

Because the temple, in spite of its grandeur, didn't enhance life but inhibited it, didn't heal but hurt. After all, though it was a "religious structure," the temple was not built on faith. King Herod, a lackey of Rome, had built it not to glorify God, but to impress and placate the Jews. And, what went on there, the sacrificial system, the separation of male from female, and Jew from non-Jew, became more and more oppressive, more and more a denial of the life God intended for all people.

In order for God to get the future God wanted, the temple, big, mighty, and apparently successful though it was, needed to be swept away. Then, something else, a new way of living, a new way of understanding and serving God and others, something begun by Jesus, could be born and grow.

Our lives are like that. If they're built on what's false, what's selfish, self-serving, or untrue, or if they're manipulated or controlled by someone or something that's selfish, self-serving, or untrue, they're going to end up being destructive, destructive of our own hearts and souls, bodies and minds, as well as of the hearts and souls, bodies and minds of others. They'll be a "life-that-is-death."

Our hearts and souls, bodies and minds, tell us when we're living a "life-that-is-death." We may wear a mask, smile and be engaging, and hide it successfully from others. But there's no hiding the anxiety, stress, and pain from ourselves. And, eventually, there's no hiding it from those closest to us; those relationships will become troubled and broken. These are signs that the foundation we've built upon is false, that the life structure we've erected is destructive, and needs to come down, needs to die, so something healthier, more life-giving, can be born, and grow, in its place. We may not have erected this life structure, selfishly, for ourselves, we may have done it to placate, keep happy, or avoid conflict with, someone who's dominated, controlled, manipulated, or abused us, but fear and conflict avoidance are also false foundations. They too, lead to a life-that-is-death that ought to end.

Yet, though our hearts and souls, bodies and minds cry out from the pain and brokenness of this "life-that-is-death," we resist its collapse, its end, its death. Even in the most abusive, oppressive relationships! We resist because though it's painful and destructive it's at least familiar and requires no change! We prefer the known of a life-that-is-death, to the unknown its end would bring, even though its end would bring the hope of rebirth to a life that's fuller, better, healthier, more human.

But Jesus wants us to know that we don't need to fear that end, that death. We don't need to fear the destruction, the collapse, of anything we've built on a false foundation, anything we've created that's life-denying to us and others. Because God loves us, God wants it to end, so our lives can be reborn and rebuilt upon a truer, better, healthier, more life-giving foundation. God wants it to end because the ending will shake us up, and leave us foundation-less. That anxious, painful crisis time will hold within it the opportunity to turn to the true, life-giving foundation for our lives – God's love.

When we make God's love our life-foundation everything changes. We find that we're not so much building anything ourselves, as we are letting God build our identities, our spirits, our lives. We find that we're not building on a "thing" like popularity, success, wealth, or power, but living in a relationship, a relationship where we're receiving, recognizing, trusting, and expressing gratitude for

the blessings we need for life. We find that we don't have to "make" anything of ourselves but simply live as who we already are because of that relationship – children of God!

Children of God! That's who we really are. That's what we find when God's love becomes our life-foundation. That's what we declare here, at the baptismal font, the foundation laying place for our lives. Here God gives a foundation to build our lives upon - a gift of unconditional love and worth! Here God says to us what God said to Jesus at his baptism – "You are my child, my beloved, I'm pleased with you." Here, we too, are claimed as God's children, told we're God's beloved, pleasing and worthy to God, just as we are. Told we don't need any other life-foundation, and never will.

God's love! That's the foundation! That's the only thing true life-that-is-life can be built upon!

Is your life full of brokenness and pain? Look at the foundation what you've built it upon! Has trust in success and financial security driven you to work yourself to a frazzle and deprive your family of time with you? Has desire for power and control led you to destroy your marriage and your relationship with your children? Has wanting to be popular led you to deny who you really are and constantly wear a mask, so that no one really knows you? Has refuge in some kind of addiction taken you away from your true self and the people who love you? Is conflict avoidance all you have to live for, trying always to placate someone who's domineering, controlling, or abusive?

God doesn't want you to lead a life-that-is-death. That denies your worth and the worth of others as God's children. God wants every life-that-is-death to end. God wants something better for you, me, and everyone. That's why Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Having life abundantly isn't about getting more of any of the stuff – popularity, success, wealth, power, or conflict avoidance that we may try to build our lives upon. It's a life rich in relationship, rich in love for self, God, and others. That life begins with the blessing of God's unconditional love, then grows as it trusts in that love, and matures as it shares it with others. That's life-that-is-life!

Abundant life! That's what God wants for you! So don't be afraid of dying to anything less than that life. God will be with you in the pain that is sure to come with letting the old life-that-is-death go, letting it die. God will be with you in the foundation-less time, that's sure to follow. God will be with you to be the bridge into a new birth, and a growth into new life. God will be with you to make the difficult end into a precious, divine opportunity. God will be with you because you're God's child, beloved by God. God wants you to find and be that person.

Are you mired in a life-that-is-death? God doesn't want you to be. God wants it to end. God came to us in Jesus so we can have life and have it abundantly. God will be with you through the pain and uncertainty of the end of the old and the birth of the new life that God wants to give, a life where you can be who you really are – God's beloved child, and live with others as they really are – God's beloved children. God's love is the foundation for it, and God's love will build something new and wonderful upon it, a life rich in love for yourself, for God, and for others.

And it's all there for you free, as a gift. Receive that gift. Give thanks and live. Amen.

Loving God,

We give thanks for your love.

We are your children, beloved by you, precious to you.

Everything we are and need to be as individuals, and in relationship,

...is wrapped up in being your children.

You intend that to be the foundation of every life, a life that is good, true, and abundant.

Yet, so often, we forget your love, and so, also forget who we are as your children.

And, so, rather than live our life in relationship with you, and through you with others,

...rather than receive what we need for life as a gift of your daily, abundant blessing,

...we try to build a life, construct something for ourselves, on some other foundation.

So, we place our trust in popularity, success, wealth, power, or some other thing –

...and we may do very well at getting what we thought we wanted and needed,

...we may end up popular, successful, wealthy, or powerful,

...but regardless, we end up not with true, abundant life, but with a life-that-is death.

We and those around us suffer as a result.

Yet, because it is familiar we cling to it and protect it.

This is not what you want for us or for those who love us.

You want every life-that-is-death to end.

Help us to trust that.

Help us to trust that you will be with us if we stop propping up what needs to collapse.

Help us to trust that you will be with us through every painful ending,

through the death of what needs to die,

...so that the newness of life you want for us can be born, be nurtured, and grow,

...so that we may know and love ourselves and those around us as your children,

...and so we, our relationships, and eventually the world, which you have entrusted to our care,

...may be healed, and your will done here, as it is in heaven.

Seeking to live our true identity as your children, we pray for those known to us with special needs.

We pray for the homeless and the hungry, for the ministry of the Interfaith Hospitality Network,

...the Urban Ministries of the Eastern Ohio Association, and Bethany's efforts to offer support.

We pray that you would move in many hearts to bring new people and new resources to this work.

We pray for those more distant who bear the burdens of injustice and oppression,

...the Esperanza communities of Tijuana, the children of Ponca Creek.

We pray for those known by name to us who need your special blessing: Glenn, Karen, Dorothy.