

# Get Busy Dyin'

A Sermon Expositing John 12:20-33

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As many differences of opinion as are on display in our world these days, there seems to be one thing remaining that is still uniformly despised? Death.

Think of the coalitions we as humans have formed *against* death. The Susan G. Komen foundation may be the gold standard in fund raising against a particular threat of death. In 2019 supporters from all over pooled \$194 million in the name of defeating death. But they're not the only ones turning up their nose to mortality. Some of my hospital colleagues in my time as a chaplain shaved their heads to raise awareness for cancer doing their part stand against death. And do you remember some summers ago when millions – *and I do not exaggerate* you'll recall - literally millions of people dumped buckets of ice water over their heads to strike against the particular form of death we call ALS. To these financial and symbolic efforts we add the work of medical professionals, researchers, first responders, and of course vaccine makers – a veritable army stood up against death. And of course we include all of those who pray fervently for themselves or for someone they love to be saved from the grips of our one common enemy. All together we find that most all of us are fighting death in one way or another. If we're not actively fighting our own, we're fighting a loved one's. Some of us are even fighting a death that's already happened. I know.

Death seems to be the one element that draws the ire of all. Just think of that iconic scene in the film *Shawshank Redemption*. Andy Dufresne and his fellow inmate, Red, sit together in the yard of Shawshank Prison lamenting days gone by. Andy struggles to conjure hope, Red counsels him that hope might be dangerous in a place like Shawshank. Determined though Andy delivers a now ageless line, "I guess it comes down to a simple choice really," say it with me if you know it, "you either get busy livin'; or you get busy dyin'."

It is the way that line is nearly universally interpreted that proves to me the unrelenting hatred of death. It is simply understood that what Andy meant was that he and by extension, we should all get busy livin'. I've heard no one ever suggest that to get busy dyin' is the higher calling. No one that is, except Jesus.

Jesus tells us in our gospel reading today that those who are most interested in self-preservation won't live anyway and those who put preservation aside will know a greater *kind of life*. Finally, he calls those who would follow him to be where he is even as he cryptically predicts his own death. Jesus's call it seems is not, in the words of Andy Dufresne to, "Get busy livin'," but instead to, "get busy dyin'."

It is a curious thing though, because "to live" seems to signify all the good things in life, the things God wants for us. Even for Andy, in the context of a harsh and undeserved life sentence to "get busy livin'" meant to get about enacting his plan to get out, get to the beach, build a boat, and live a life of leisure. I don't know what get busy living means to you, but probably something similar. It means to take life by the horns, right? To strive ever harder toward your goals, to attain success. It means simultaneously to knuckle down and to not work too hard. To experience the things that exhilarate you, to go sky diving, to spend more time in the outdoors, to stop and smell the roses, be with friends more often (oh someday soon, we shall), throw caution to the wind, live it up! To get busy livin' is an attitude. It's an attitude that churns through the hard stuff in order to find the good

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

stuff. It's a relentless pursuit of doing, having, being what we most want in every moment and taking none for granted. And what's wrong with that!?

I'm not really sure there is anything wrong with that. It's a lovely notion, one that I intend to spend a bit of my lifetime pursuing. It's just that to always be busy with those pursuits is to ignore that not everything and not everyone around us is "living" in the same way. In fact, it's to ignore that not even we can live in that way all the time. That's the great fallacy of the prosperity gospel. That's the theology you'll hear on television from the smiley preachers in big stadiums who write books about attaining one's best life now. They're not entirely wrong. God does want abundant life for you. It's just that God wants the same for everyone and not everyone has easy access. It ignores that there are deathly things in the world. "To get busy livin'", at least as I understand it is an attitude that does the same.

To "get busy dyin'" is an attitude too I think. I hope the idea of Jesus calling us all to our own expedited physical end is absurd enough that I don't even need to explain it away, but let's at least point out that the universal church wouldn't be very effective in the world if all of its members suddenly *left* the world. So yes, while God's work in the world has been forwarded at times by martyrs, and by the death of Christ himself, the call to die is more than literal. It is an attitude, but it is an attitude I think, informed by what it means to truly die. I have spent a fair amount of time in my ministry years with those who knew they were in their last days, hours, or minutes. I've sat and talked with them and while nobody experiences death in exactly the same way I've noted a few common themes. Generosity is one. Perhaps it isn't the highest good a person can do to give of what they have when they won't be needing it, but I don't really mean just giving away *things*. Many of those I've travelled that long road with gained a kind of insightfulness regarding the needs of those around them and they knew the time to provide was now. Some, yes, gave of their estate or possessions. Others though, gave forgiveness they hadn't gotten around to giving. Some gave advice. Some gave time, the most valuable of all resources near the end, to virtually anyone who wanted it. They gave.

Many I've known have instructed me with unusual clarity on what the most important things are. Family, friends, faith, yes we can all rattle them off; we know what's most important. But until you *feel* how important they are for one who's life is nearly over you don't really know *how* important they are.

Some I have known have reached a level of fearlessness no others can know. Death is a scary thing to be sure, but for those who were afforded the time to grieve their own loss of life and emerge they find there is nothing else to fear. I have seen folks brave the pain, the indignity, the suffering of last days in ways that I wish I could brave any given Tuesday.

In death we approach our days with abandon, we give things away, we make amends with those we've fallen out with, we find a clarity about what is most important, we learn to let go, we learn to love. When self preservation suddenly is not our most basic instinct

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain;" Jesus tells us, "but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

So let's live it up at times if we must, but as we near the end of our journey to the cross this Lenten season let us not forget to also get busy dyin'.

Amen.