

"Dead Man Walking"
Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent
Lectionary Year A
February 10, 2008
Texts: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19
Dr. David T. Howeth

Fred Gealy taught at Perkins School of Theology at SMU for many years. On one occasion Professor Gealy was delivering a paper to a group of hospital chaplains on the biblical understanding of death. At the conclusion of his lecture, Dr. Gealy was approached by one particular chaplain who felt that the professor's remarks had been entirely too academic. So, rather sarcastically, he asked the question, "Dr. Gealy, have you ever held the hand of a dying person?" Gealy smiled gently and replied, "Sir, I've never held any other kind."

In the movie *Dead Man Walking*, Susan Sarandon plays Sister Helen Prejean (Pray-jawn), a nun who is asked to serve as the spiritual director for the last few days of the life of an arrogant thug on death row, Matthew Poncelet, played by Sean Penn. Poncelet has been convicted of the brutal killing of a teenage couple. His partner in the crime apparently had enjoyed the benefit of a more competent attorney, and he received a life sentence. Poncelet was sentenced to die by lethal injection, and though Sister Helen tries to obtain a stay of execution, he is denied one by a governor who is running for reelection and can't afford to be seen as soft on crime.

Toward the end of the film, as Matthew takes his last steps from his cell to the room where he will be executed, accompanied by Sister

Helen, a prison guard in the hall calls out, "dead man walking." It's a chilling moment for the movie, and it has come to be a provocative statement for me. Dead man walking. What an odd thing to be said, yet what a true thing to be said, not just for a convicted killer on the way to face his death, but for each of us on the way to face ours. For you see, Professor Gealy was right, there is no other kind of hand to be held than the hand of a dying person. Each of us is a dead man walking.

The writer of the first book in our Bibles understood this to be true. So in the book of *Genesis* we read the story about how death entered into our world in the beginning and every day thereafter. Mankind refuses to live within the boundaries established by God, and the result is death. Adam becomes the first dead man walking. The Apostle Paul comments on the story of creation in our epistle lesson for today and reminds us that indeed death came into the world through one man, Adam, and has since spread to all of us. Each of us, like Adam before us, is a dead man walking.

Most of us don't like to talk about death. The subject makes us uncomfortable and perhaps even afraid. We don't like to face the fact that we are all going to die. It's something we would rather not think about. Certainly it's not healthy to be obsessed about death and dying. I am not suggesting to you that you need to be morbid. But I am suggesting that denying death and its power does not serve the good news of the gospel. When it comes to faith, it is not in our best interest to deny the reality and the power of death. For you see, it is only when we take death seriously that we begin to take life seriously. And *only in realizing the power of death is it possible to appreciate the power of our*

God who, in Christ, has conquered death.

Hearing about death is like a good news/bad news joke. It's like an angel coming down to earth and telling you that he's got some good news and some bad news for you. The good news is that heaven is full of the most beautiful golf courses imaginable and that there is a tournament every day. "That's great!," you exclaim. "What's the bad news?" "You've got a tee time at 2:00 tomorrow afternoon," replies the angel. When it comes to death, the bad news is that it is real and pervasive. The Bible makes that clear. None of us gets to avoid dying.

But the good news is that *death does not have the final word*. As bad as death is, it is not all there is. There is grace. Grace is a power far greater than death. Grace overcomes death. Grace overturns death. Grace brings life out of death. And as Paul makes clear in Romans 5, grace exceeds beyond measure. We can't comprehend the extent of God's grace and the full effect of God's grace.

The power of death is nothing when compared to the power of grace. Our mutual friend, Don Yeager, has a wonderful image of the power of death versus the power of grace. Death is a feather pillow being emptied out in a hurricane. Grace is gathering all of the feathers back up again without losing a one. The hymn we will sing at the conclusion of our service says it so well.

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
 grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
 Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured,
 there where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,

freely bestowed on all who believe!
 You that are longing to see his face,
 will you this moment his grace receive?

We are each a dead man walking. We are walking toward our death, and yet, something accompanies us on that walk. We don't walk all by ourselves. Like Sister Helen does for Matthew Poncelet, grace goes with us on that walk, with a gentle, loving hand on our shoulder. Grace. There is more power in it than death can ever claim. In one of the many touching scenes in *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Helen does her best to sing a hymn to Matthew a short time before midnight when he is scheduled to die. She says to him at one point, "Don't you know, Matthew, that you are a son of God?" "No one has ever called me a son of God before, Sister. I've been called a lot of things in my life, but never a son of God," Matthew responds. Do you see? *Each of us is a dead man walking, but each of us is also a child of God.* That is grace.

Grace is not cheap. It's a free gift, says Paul, and he's right. It's an expensive gift, however. It comes at a price, a great price, a great price for God first, and a great price for us second. Paul reminds us of the price God paid for our sin and death. It is the price of God's only begotten son. His righteous death leads to justification and life for us all. Christ's obedience to God, even unto death, makes up for our disobedience. One death, the death of Jesus Christ, makes it possible for each and every one of us to have life—abundant life, eternal life, authentic life, life as God means for it to be experienced. God paid the price for our life through the sacrificial death of his son, and that's a great price indeed.

But we pay a price as well. We don't get something for nothing.

God graciously offers us redemption, but *there is only one way we can claim and appropriate that redemption, by taking responsibility for who we are and what we have done.* That's the price we pay, and it's a great price indeed. It's the price of honesty. We must come clean. We must admit the poor choices we have made. We must confess our sin. We must repent and ask for forgiveness.

The best thing about the movie *Dead Man Walking* for me is the way in which the film deals with the relationship between responsibility and redemption. Sister Helen makes it clear to Matthew that the only way for him to find peace is to be honest about what he has done and take responsibility for it. In the beginning of the movie, he claims he is innocent. He says that his friend did all the killing and that he just watched. Matthew claims that his friend deserves to die, but that he doesn't. Sound familiar?

Go back to the Garden of Eden for a moment. In the verses that follow our lectionary reading for today, we have an interesting conversation taking place between God and Adam. The Lord calls to Adam, "Where are you?" Adam responds, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." God replies, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" And how does Adam answer this question? Does he come clean, confess his sin, take responsibility for his actions? Not hardly. He says, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

It's the woman's fault. And it's God's fault for making the woman. Everyone is to blame except poor Adam. He's a victim. Between God

making the woman, and the snake tempting her, and her eating the fruit and then giving it to Adam, how could he help but sin? Look at the situation. He had no choice. The deck was stacked against him. He didn't have a chance.

In the movie, Matthew Poncelet acts like Adam, and so do we all the time. We make poor choices, we reach for inappropriate things. We violate the boundaries God has set for us. We do self-destructive things that we think will make us feel better about ourselves. No, we may not commit murder, but we find other ways to act out our insecurities, ways that lead to death as much as murder does. In fact, even in the movie, Matthew is not the only character who needs redemption. That is one of things that makes the movie so good, so true, so real.

The parents of the murdered teenagers need to be redeemed as well. They need to be redeemed from the hate they have embraced in their grief and pain. They need to let it go; it is killing them. It has ended their life, and they can't seem to get past it. Each of those parents is also a dead man walking. But by the end of the film, at least one of the parents, ironically with the help of Sister Helen, begins to take responsibility for his feelings and seeks the redemption that will allow him to get on with his life. In the last scene of the movie, the father of the boy whom Matthew Poncelet had killed, is in a little church, praying. And who is by his side? Sister Helen, representing once again the grace of God which accompanies each one of us who realizes he is a dead man walking.

As I have said, Matthew Poncelet in the movie talks just like Adam, and he's not the only one. We do it all the time. Like Adam we would

prefer to be victims. It's always someone else's fault. We find our own snakes. We blame our parents, we blame our schools, we blame our government, we blame our elected officials, we blame our neighborhoods, we blame our corporations, we blame the media, we even blame our churches. We haven't done anything wrong; we are just victims of a sinful world. We don't want to take responsibility for who *we* are and what *we* have done.

But we have to if we want to be redeemed. In the film that is how Matthew finds redemption before he dies. He confesses to Sister Helen that indeed he is guilty of the crime for which he has been sentenced to die. He comes clean. He is honest about who he is and what he has done. He takes responsibility for himself. And so he dies with dignity and at peace.

Before Matthew is taken to the room of execution, before he hears the guard proclaim that he is a dead man walking, Sister Helen asks him to look at her face as the lethal injections are being administered. "I want the last thing you see in this world to be the face of love," she says to him. So it is with us. Death is not the final face we see, not if we have given ourselves to God. Grace has the last word, and when death comes for us, as it will for each of us, it is God's face, the face of love, we see. Yes, you are a dead man walking, but because of God's grace and because of your willingness to take responsibility for your life, *you are walking toward the loving face of God.*