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Making a Good Death

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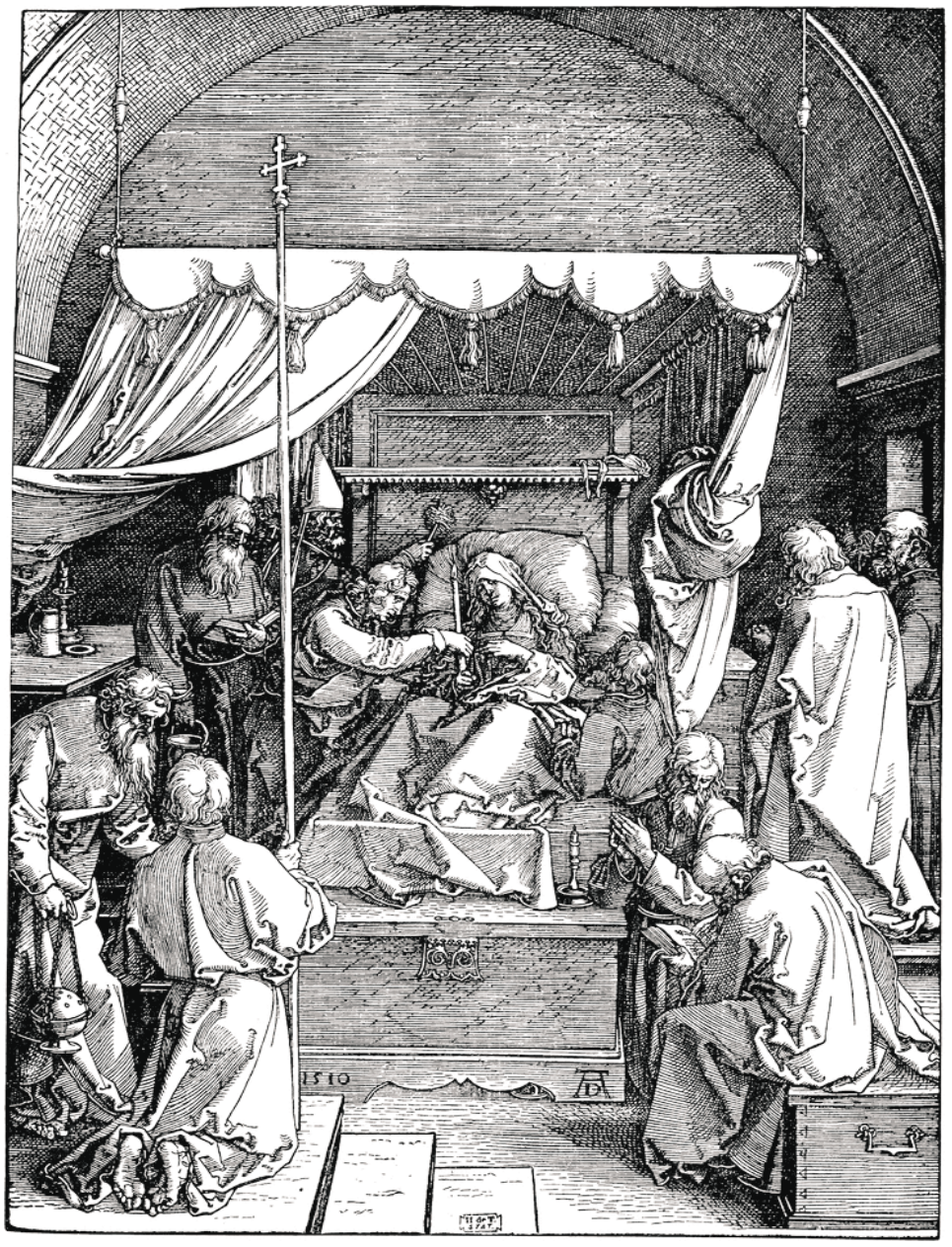
Recently, while teaching a Bible class about Mary, the mother of our Lord, I showed the group a woodcut of Mary's death by Albrecht Dürer. My research on the woodcut indicated that it had been seen as a devotional picture of how Christians should "make a good death" and the practices necessary to such a death.[1] Mary, in the center, is lying in bed, with the eleven disciples gathered around her. Peter, in liturgical dress and a miter, is asperging her with holy water; John is helping her hold a lighted candle to keep the devil away; several are reading Scripture; one is holding a thurifer, another a cross high above the scene, dominating it; while several are kneeling in prayer. From a chalice and paten on the sideboard we can assume they have just partaken of the Lord's Supper. Christ is not physically portrayed receiving his mother, nor are there any supernatural beings ready to take Mary's soul into heaven. This is a realistic account of death. Christ is present in the disciples, the church, as it brings Christ to her. It is a realistic picture of a beloved saint surrounded by those who love her, who have come to comfort her and perform the rituals for such a time. The cross, communion, the lighted candle, Scripture—all to keep the devil at bay so that Mary will die in faith and go to meet her son, Jesus. This is a picture of a good death, one that every Christian desires.

[1]Lisbeth Smedegaard Andersen, *Guds Moder og Himlens Veninde: Mariabilledets Historier* (Denmark: Thanking og Appel, 2008) 242–245.

What practices make a good death for a faithful Christian? It might be more important to plan for the event of dying itself and to relate this to our family and friends than to plan for the funeral.



The Practices of Good Dying

As the class and I were looking closely, talking about these things, suddenly someone asked, "What are those practices?" While many of us had an implicit sense of things we might do at such a time (read the word, sing hymns, etc.) we realized that many people now facing death—either their own, or that of a loved one—had no idea of what to do except perhaps to call for a pastor. While a pastor

should be able to lead the family at this time, what should the dying person have done himself or herself in preparation for such an hour? As we began talking about deaths we had attended, people sat up. It was as though we were extracting treasures out of the old household of faith—old, not new—and making them explicit. Except for some vague notion of the last rites among the Roman Catholics, most of the class had never thought about what kinds of things they should do when facing death, or what they might want done. As we talked about it and told stories of the deaths of saints we knew and had attended, it became apparent to all of us, as someone remarked, that it was more important to plan for this event—telling our families and friends what we might want as we were dying—than to plan our funerals, which some had already done in great detail.

As we looked at the picture and told our stories, we realized how little explicit knowledge there was among us about such practices. I had been at what I would call good deaths and several that were not. Family history was also a help for me personally. As the family genealogist and the one who has remembered their stories, I had found great spiritual wealth in the accounts of the deaths of my great-grandparents. These were found in obituaries published in the church paper, back when the denomination was small enough to publish extensive obituaries for laypeople such as themselves. Most precious in such obituaries was the pastor's account that recorded how the deceased had met the final enemy. They became edifying stories for family members to remember and use for their own encouragement and devotion. That my great-grandfather Haakon wanted to sing "Thy Little Ones Dear Lord Are We" with its strong hope of heaven in its final stanzas was precious to me. These are stories I tell my niece and nephews and their children as part of family lore, but also for evangelical purposes. I also pray for their salvation and want my prayers to be answered. The class listened with amazement to these stories and began to wonder both where they could find such stories of their own family, if they did not know them, but also prepare to leave behind such memories for their own children and grandchildren.

Preparing with the Pastor

Pastors should be able to help families with these rituals, and lead them through these final days and hours, but if our experience as a family is typical, pastors are not always ritually competent in these delicate matters and would be much helped if the family of the dying could relate to them the wishes of the dying. The old pastoral care books have ample advice for pastors as they come to the bed of a dying sinner. One such book from the eighteenth century by the Dane Erich Pontoppidan says that the first thing pastors should do is urge the congregation to tell them as quickly as possible that a family member is ill, so they can get there in time, given how serious illnesses in that day could prove mortal very quickly.[2] Even

[2]Erich Pontoppidan, *Collegium Pastorale Practicum: Pontoppidans Pastoraltheologi,* trans. to Norwegian by Hans Salomonsen (Oslo: Luther Forlag A/S, 1986) 448–449.

today, pastors need to know about such situations; they cannot divine them without help. Pastors should be prepared to come and hear the dying person's confession of sin and declaration of faith and to give him or her communion. We asked each other if that is what we wished. Most said they did, but that it had never occurred to them to tell their family. When my father was dying, we did not know his death was so near, nor did we know that once they began the morphine drip he would fade away and not be able to receive communion. A pastor and a good doctor should tell the family about the process of "active dying" so the family can make provision to fulfill the wishes of the dying, who may have left detailed instructions.

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I think there are about four things to think about: telling the pastor, preparing for one's exhortation to the family, enumerating the Scripture passages and hymns one wants to hear, and naming those one wants to be with them at the very end. Getting the pastor involved would be the first thing, but there is another ritual about which we might be uneasy today, though it is something we might at least wonder about: the final confession of faith. Books on the deaths of Christian martyrs hang on the dying saint's last confession of faith in order to edify those left behind and to counteract false reports of retractions of their faith, something enemies might report for their own purposes. When Martin Luther lay dying in Eisleben, it was important to his followers that he make clear confession of his faith so his enemies could not say he had reverted to his childhood faith (Roman Catholicism) in his last moments. His friends and colleagues Justus Jonas and Michael Coelius called out to him loudly so he could hear, "Reverend Father, are you ready to die in the name of the Christ and the doctrine which you have preached?" A distinct "Yes" was Luther's reply.[3]

While such confessions of faith are not as necessary for us as they were in Luther's context, they do have eternal significance for the families who will treasure the stories of how their loved ones died in the faith. This may be why deathbed stories of a mother or grandmother were faithfully recorded in the family lore. While the reports of the pastor or family about the death of the beloved are traditional, it may not have occurred to any of us to have thought about what we will do at this moment, should we have time. My great-grandmother, Torbjør Kaali Tinseth, appeared to have been prepared for this event. Her pastor wrote in her obituary:

> She struggled to live as a Christian and used God's word very diligently. When she became ill last fall, she was very concerned to know that she was saved and that her family was saved as well for then there would be a sure hope of meeting in heaven, never more to part. A few days before she died, she said, "Now all I

[3]E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1950) 730.

have is Jesus." With that confession she went home to heaven because of the unmerited grace of God.[4]

That pastor's report is very edifying to my family and me. It also shows that she had prepared for her dying, and the exhortation is clearly meant for all the family to hear. When my father, a pious pastor, was dying, he could not speak very clearly, but he well knew what was transpiring. As the family stood around his bed and sang his favorite hymns and prayed, his eyes glistened with joy. "Beautiful, beautiful," he slurred, and then broke into a hymn we did not quite expect: "My Song Is Love Unknown." While we knew he loved it for its fine poetry, especially its alliteration ("frail flesh" was a favorite), we did not expect it at that juncture. His rich baritone rang out in the room, his face unearthly and shining, as he finished the tune only with "la la la."

It was his last message to us and we got it, I think, but later, in his last effects, I came across a torn sheet of paper with his now shaky but still elegant handwriting in which he had written down the words of the hymn, almost as though he were memorizing it for a time in which he would need it. "Here might I stay and sing," he had written, "no story so divine / Never was love, dear King, / never was grief like thine? / This is my friend, in whose sweet praise / I all my days could gladly spend."[5] As an old pastor, he had seen many deaths and wanted to be ready for his deathbed exhortation, as they called it. And he also knew that song was the last thing to go, and he wanted to be ready.

Preparing with the Family

Do you want singing? And what? By whom? Many Lutherans and other Christians will probably say yes and have a list. Singing someone across into eternity can be very moving; we can only imagine what it must be like to go into the light listening to favorite hymns. How that is done is of some significance. After attending the death of someone I knew well, where the family left a CD of favorite hymns running on a replay loop that went on for days, I made certain my sister knew that is *not* what I want at the end. For me, family members singing old favorites would be sweeter and more comforting. My father told me many times about rushing out to the deaths of old saints while the family stood around the bed singing hymns as the dying gasped his or her last. Then he would pray with the family in thanksgiving for the life of the deceased, close their eyes, and draw the sheet up over their head. After which he would leave so the family could grieve without him there. It is pretty much what happened at his death as well. We sang hymns to him from the old *Concordia* (hymnal), even when he was no longer responding. Singing them by ourselves and with the family was a blessing we still treasure.

Then there are the exhortations, a practice probably only possible in a long

[4]*Folkebladet*, May 1930.

[5]Samuel Crossman, "My Song Is Love Unknown," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) #343.

dying and leave-taking. People used to think about this, but not now. As one wag has said, we used to have sex in private and death in public, now we have sex in public and death in private! Because death was public in earlier centuries, most people had a sense for the ritual of it. I am fascinated in my reading in the letters of Lutheran pastors' wives on the frontier during the nineteenth century their reports on the death of a friend or neighbor. They all seemed to know what to do. Not only do the reports indicate they knew the rituals, they also knew that their exhortations would be reported either by mouth or letter for the edification of those who came after. One of my favorite records of this type is the description by Mrs. Elisabeth Koren in an 1871 letter to Linka Preus of the death of Mrs. Karen Larsen, the first wife of the first president of Luther College, who died after suffering long from tuberculosis. While it is a bit long, it shows how the dying woman had thought through these last hours and had made preparation even to where her bed would be as she died.

> She ate cereal in the morning, later in the forenoon, I think it was, she said, Now surely I am dying. She had the bed moved into the front room, as she had earlier said it should be. She wanted it to be so when she realized that it would soon be over. At dinner she spoke with the children, first blessing and exhorting the three youngest, especially Herman [the youngest one of the children]. Larsen told me this himself as we stood by her casket. She could do no more then, but later she called Lulla [an older daughter] and blessed and admonished her. Then she said farewell to Marie [another daughter], Elisabeth Lommen [a companion], and sent greetings to all her friends. That evening she fell asleep and lay, as before, sitting high in the bed. Larsen sat beside her the whole time, reading and talking to her. She had struggled and fought so, but that day and night there were no shadows or fear and uneasiness about her, only peace and quiet. Every time Larsen asked her a question about her faith and assurance of salvation, she answered clearly and freely, "Yes." At three a.m. she slept, without struggle, as peaceful and trusting as a child would lie sleeping in her mother's arms. God be praised and thanked for all his grace.[6]

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This letter, which also records what Mrs. Koren did after the death, covering the corpse with bleeding hearts blossoms that had been blooming in their home, indicates that she and the rest of them all had a clear sense of what one did when one was dying. Mrs. Larsen had her bed moved into the front room, a public space, where it would be convenient for her and the family as she made her final farewells in the form of both blessing and exhortation (stay close to the Lord, etc.). There is also a clear order in the people who come to her: first, her youngest children; then, her older children; then, the friends and caretakers who were there, like Elisabeth

[6]Letter of Elisabeth Koren to Linka Preus, 1871, Preus Library, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, author's translation.

Lommen; and finally, greetings to her friends whom she could not see. (It is fascinating how families implicitly know the order for these farewells.) Then her husband, who remained for her death, asked her as she was nearing the end to confess her faith. Her death without a struggle was a sign that she died confidently. Everything in this letter reveals an implicit knowledge that everyone seemed to know and understand, even the dying person. Its very formality seemed to offer its own kind of comfort, something that Mrs. Koren seemed to derive in her report of the event, also a part of the ritual. These reports were also part of the legacy of the dying person and eagerly reported in letters like this. People wanted to tell and hear the details surrounding the death of the loved one, something that we tell and treasure also today, although the details tend to be more medical than spiritual.

Thinking Ahead

While everything treated in this article assumes a long dying or at least some time for the saying of farewells—which may not be possible, given accidents and other sudden deaths—the idea of thinking ahead to one's death is certainly part of Christian tradition. In the past, many a healthy Lutheran youth began the day singing a hymn attributed to Emilie Juliane (1637–1706), "Who Knows How Soon My Days Are Ended," and went out into the morning healthy and young but were dead by nightfall.

Who knows how soon my days are ended?
My days are few and time speeds on.
How swiftly in this world of changes,
May death approach and life be gone.
O God, for Jesus' sake I pray
That I in peace may pass away.

So teach me, Lord, my days to number
That when my hour of death appears,
The wounds of Christ may be my refuge
Nor may I spare repentant tears.
O God, for Jesus' sake I pray
That I in peace may pass away.

Help me to put my house in order,
That I may ever ready be
To leave this world and say in meekness:
Lord, as Thou wilt, deal Thou with me.
O God, for Jesus' sake I pray
That I in peace may pass away.

O Father, let my sins be covered
With Jesus' blood and righteousness;
By faith this spotless garment wearing,
I find relief from all distress.
O God, for Jesus' sake I pray
That I in peace may pass away.

From Jesus naught my soul can sever,
Nor life nor death can do me harm:
Him as my Lord and God confessing,
I shall with ease my foes disarm.
O God, for Jesus' sake I pray
That I in peace may pass away.[7]

Some might regard singing such a hymn today as impossibly morbid, but the hymn does prepare the singer for his or her own death. Particularly interesting is the second stanza, which uses the language of Ps 90 and may also have referred to Luther's commentary on the psalm, especially v. 12, "So teach us to number our days that we may get us a heart of wisdom" (RSV). For Luther, one could not be wise if one did not consider that one was going to die. He was amazed that there are many who live as though they are going to beat the odds.

> The vast mass of humanity lives out its life as though there were no death and, for that matter, no God. This is the most terrible of all disasters and the one most deserving of tears—when people who are about to die still imagine they will go on living; when, overwhelmed by miseries, they still dream of happiness; and when, in the most critical perils that surround them, they are deliriously self-assured.[8]

Luther's comments help us think about the wisdom of asking people to think about their ending. It could be part of an evangelical ministry and soul care that would be wise and ultimately salvific. Finally, whether or not the person will be able to put his or her plans into practice at the hour of their death is not the point; but having them think about the hour of their death beforehand might help them face it when it comes. Knowing that one will die, as Moses says in the psalm, is the beginning of wisdom that results in the chance "to live and to perform everything we do with humble hearts."[9]

In any case, a pastor or teacher in a congregation could raise some very interesting conversations and questions in an adult forum with people who might be fascinated by the rituals and rites associated with one's own dying. The conversation as we pondered the scene of Mary's death grew richer and richer in the things of the Spirit. Such a conversation might help many faithful Christians to make preparations for their dying and to think differently about their endings. It may even cause faith to spring up in those who have not thought much at all of their own death. ⊕

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[7]Emilie Juliane, "Who Knows How Soon My Days Are Ending," trans. Herman Brueckner, *American Lutheran Hymnal* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1930) #301.

[8]Martin Luther, "Psalm 90," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 13 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956) 128–129.

[9]Ibid.,130.