

Sermon for Good Friday, March 29, 2013 John 18:1-19:42 "Ars Moriendi"

In recent days I've been reading Drew Gilpin Faust's book "This Republic of Suffering." It is a masterful account of how Americans dealt with death during and after the Civil War. The war, like all wars, created a large number of dead and dying people. In fact, the civil war was responsible for the death of 750,000 men. 750,000...greater than the number of dead for all armed conflicts in which the United States engaged, from the Revolutionary War to the current engagement in Afghanistan.

One consequence of that terrible toll of death was how to handle the mortal remains of those who passed. Often, in the heat of battle, bodies simply remained on the battlefield. The winning side could go out and retrieve their wounded and dead, but the losing side would retreat, and often their dead comrades in arms were either left where they lay, or shoveled into mass graves.

There was a great focus in Christian thinking during that era on dying well, what the medieval spiritual writers called "Ars Moriendi," or the Art of Dying. They wrote the treatises on good dying during the time of the Black Death, when millions died of the plague. But the concept of Ars Moriendi was equally potent when the Civil War was raging. Such a good dying, in the period of the Civil War, included being in good relationship with God, at peace regarding one's death, and sending loving thoughts to those whom the dying man left behind.

And so men would often write letters to their loved ones before a battle, talking about how they knew that death was near, saying that they were ready to be with God, were not afraid, and that their loved ones should know that they would wait for them in the Heavenly realm. If they were wounded or died in battle, comrades in arms would write such letters to the families of the wounded, giving them comfort that they had not been alone, they had been reconciled to their death, and that they were ready to meet their maker as children of God.

This was, no doubt, a comfort to the families who received such letters, but one of the great sadnesses for these mourners was that they would not know where their loved one lay after death. There was often no marked grave, no place where the mourners could go and commune with their dead family member. Wives and mothers wrote to the Secretary of War, asking about their boy – was he alive? If he was dead, where did he lay? Thus, advocates like Clara Barton pushed hard for a way to keep track of those who had died and their resting place, to provide solace to families and to end questions about whether or not their brother or son or father was truly dead. If one of the hallmarks of Ars Moriendi, the good dying, was being at peace with the Lord, another equally important one was that the family was able to lay the person to rest with dignity for his mortal remains, with prayer and a marking of his final resting place.

Thus, many of the dead had the first part of that good dying, but the latter part – a time and a place of prayer and commendation, with family present and a marking of the place – was often missing. In fact, the federal government worked for a decade beyond the Civil War seeking out the unmarked graves so that those who had served and died would be properly accounted for, reinterred, and named on an appropriate marker or headstone. Ten years after the war, the struggle for Ars Moriendi still consumed the souls and resources of a nation trying to recover from its wounds.

I tell you this story because on Good Friday we, too, struggle with Ars Moriendi as we listen to Jesus' death and burial. He died on a political battlefield – certainly no one could doubt that his death was as much a battle of Romans and Pharisees against a religious or political reformer they distrusted and hated – and his death was not attended to by his followers, just a few of the women who were a part of his band – his mother, his aunt, Mary of Magdala.

Did Jesus die a peaceful death? He seemed resigned to what was to happen, and accepted it with little argument. In other versions of the passion story, Jesus cries out seemingly in despair "My God, my God, why

have you forsaken me?" (a quotation from Psalm 22), but in this version from the Gospel of John, he simply says, "It is finished."

And then it is over, and his body is taken in the dead of night to a tomb donated by Joseph of Arimathea. No mourners weeping, no priests intoning prayers, no incense, only a little preparation of the body before entombment. Even the women are not present, those faithful women who had been the only ones to stand at the foot of the cross. It is simply a gentle disposal of Jesus' body to a safe place, an appropriate place, a bit of a rush because of the impending Passover feast, but it does not comport with all the proper burial rituals of 1st century Jews. Not an artful death, not a good death as the medieval scholars and the Civil War widows might have envisioned one. A lonely death after a hard, hard dying.

I wonder if Jesus felt abandoned while he was slowly dying on the cross, if he felt like he had failed in his mission, if it all was worth it. Or did he know that this was the last good thing he could do, to complete the prophetic vision, to deliver redemption?

If that was the case, it was the most artful of deaths, the one that had the most meaning for all of Creation.

If we reflect on the primary qualities embodied in *Ars Moriendi*, in the Good Death, what are they? To be in good relationship with God – no question that Jesus meets this standard. He is the Son of God, fulfilling his mission by dying on the cross. To be at peace regarding one's death: those words "it is finished" seem to say that he is reconciled to what has happened, and accepts that his earthly body is completing its task. To send loving thoughts to one's family? Remember Jesus instructing the beloved disciple to treat Mary as his own mother, and telling Mary that this disciple would now be her son? Jesus is attending to the business of providing for his mother's welfare once Jesus is gone.

There may have been no conventional synagogue service, no traditional burial service with weeping women wearing torn garments, no public symbol of the honor that this man, this Son of Man, deserved at his passing.

But make no mistake. This was "Ars Moriendi" in its highest expression. Some of the trappings were missing, but they were merely that – external symbols. What truly mattered in a good dying was embodied in this most horrific of deaths.

It is good that we meditate on this most holy of deaths, and reflect upon what it might mean in our own lives. There are two directions we might cast our eyes. The first would be on the Cross, as we give thanks for Jesus' willingness to suffer and die for us, to redeem us. The second, and in some ways the harder one, is to look at our own lives. It is in our lives, of course, that we understand how we will die. Will we die the good death, knowing that we were in communion with the One who created us? Will we die at peace, knowing that we did what we could while we were able to bring the reign of God to our world? Will we die satisfied that we did what we could to attend to our families and loved ones, that no forgiveness was left undeclared, no thank you left unspoken, no arrangement for care left unplanned? Most important, will we have lived our lives in a way that pleased God?

We look up at the Cross. We see the dying and exhausted Jesus upon it. We know that no great funeral procession will mark his death. But we know that his message and the procession of followers continues even until today. This is truly a good dying, the one that yields life beyond the grave. Will your life and your death approach that standard of goodness?

Amen.