

**“What Happens After We Die (As If We Could Know)?”**  
**A Memorial Day Reflection**  
**May 26, 2019**

**I. Eternal Life?**

This being Memorial Day weekend, when we remember and honor those who fought and died for our country, I thought it would be appropriate to preach on a topic I have never preached about at Countryside: What happens after we die?

To be clear, even though I very much believe in an afterlife, I’ve never been there. I cannot presume to know what it is like. This is one reason I generally resist preaching about life after death. It’s all speculation.

However, there is a difference between pure speculation and informed speculation. While I don’t think that any of us can know what the afterlife is like, I do think that certain speculations cohere better with our beliefs about God than others.

A couple of months ago, at the Tri-Faith clergy group’s monthly lunch, the topic of death, and practices concerning what is done with dead bodies, came up. Our conversations are normally cheerier than this! But it was a fascinating conversation.

Someone asked Imam Jamal what Muslims do with people’s bodies after they die. Imam Jamal responded that the body is washed by the Imam or someone trained for this purpose at the mosque. The body is then wrapped in clean fabric and laid in the ground, preferably with no coffin. He did note, though, that because of U.S. law, bodies cannot be just laid in the ground to decompose but must be laid in a burial vault to prevent the earth on top from sinking.

“So do you wash bodies?” one of us asked. “Yes, I do,” said Jamal. “We have a special room for this at the mosque. Any trained person can do it. If you like, I can even train one of you to do it.” For whatever reason, no one jumped on the opportunity ....

“So do you ever cremate bodies?” I asked. “No,” replied the Imam. “We believe in the resurrection of the body so Muslims do not ever cremate bodies. In fact,” he further explained, “the Qur’an tells us that fire desecrates the body, which is another reason we do not accept cremation.”

Then Imam Jamal asked Rabbi Stoller what Jews do with the dead. Rabbi Stoller responded that, like Muslims, Jews believe in the resurrection of the body, so it is against Jewish practice to cremate people. “However,” he said, “quite a number of Jewish services these days are for those who have chosen cremation over burial.”

“What?!” said the Imam, nearly choking on his food. “Why do you perform Jewish funerals for these people when it is against your faith to cremate the body?”

Rabbi Stoller explained it was a concession to practicality. These days, if the synagogue refused to offer a Jewish funeral service for those who had been cremated, a lot of people would be excluded from having a Jewish service. “Besides,” he said, “since so many Jews were cremated in the holocaust, we don’t want to send a message that you cannot be Jewish, or that God sees you as inferior, if your body is cremated.”

His point about the holocaust was deeply moving. It’s a factor none of the rest of us ever has had to consider. This is one of many examples of how valuable these casual clergy lunches are for understanding the sensibilities – and sensitivities – of our neighbors.

After the rabbi was finished, all heads turned to me. “Eric, what does Countryside do?”

A bit sheepishly I said, “Well, it just so happens that we have a large, and very beautiful columbarium at our church.”

“What is a columbarium?” they said, everyone looking puzzled.

“A columbarium is specifically for storing cremains,” I explained. If only you could have seen the looks on their faces!

“What?” someone said. “You cremate people and store their ashes *in your church!*!”

If you listened closely, you could have heard the sound of synapses frying in their brains.

Their shock provoked a larger discussion about how Christians also have traditionally believed in bodily resurrection and therefore refrained from cremation for much of our history, but now cremation is actually quite popular.

“How do you justify that?” asked Imam Jamal.

I spoke of a couple of reasons why cremation is now generally accepted in Christianity. The first has to do with the intuition that has been a major part of Christianity since the beginning – that the Holy Spirit outranks all of our beliefs and even our scriptures – as when the Holy Spirit convinced Peter that it was okay to consume non-kosher foods. (You can guess how that went over!) “Therefore,” I said, “there is more focus on a person’s conversation with God when it comes to the disposition of their body than on a legal formula that stands for all people throughout all time.”

The second reason I gave is that many of us believe that, if there ever were some sort of bodily resurrection, then surely any God who could raise a human body from the dead and restore flesh to mere bones is certainly powerful enough to work with ashes. “Doesn’t Genesis say that God created us from dust in the beginning anyway?” I asked.

I doubt I persuaded any of my clergy colleagues to install a columbarium in their houses of worship. Neither did they persuade me to replace our columbarium with a body-washing room. Nevertheless, our conversation proved to be one of a great number of examples of how our beliefs, though very different – or even oppositional to each other in certain cases –

seem to resolve themselves somewhere out beyond the limits of human understanding, deep in the mystery of God.

To me, dealing with our differences is another of the great benefits of being part of the Tri-Faith Initiative. Our differences regularly provoke an experience of God's mystery. While God's mystery can be a confusing place to reside sometimes, mostly I experience a deeper sense of awe and wonder when I'm confronted with God's majesty. It reminds me that God's ways of interacting with us are so numerous and diverse that people holding beliefs that are diametrically opposed to one another can both live lives in close connection with God. I wish our political leaders knew this!

Despite our differences in burial practice, it was clear that we, and the traditions we represent, agree on a much more important thing: that there is life after death.

Really, every major religion on the planet – and most every minor one, too – teaches that life continues in one form or another after death. This pervasive agreement is rather extraordinary, don't you think?

The fact that Jesus himself believed in an afterlife is pretty convincing to me in and of itself. Yet Jesus is far from alone. As many disagreements there are among the world's religions on all kinds of beliefs, two beliefs are held in common by all of them: (1) that compassion is among the highest human values, and (2) that there is life after death.

## **II. What kind of life?**

Naturally, talk of the afterlife leads to a particular question: "What might it be like?"

Of all the world's religions, Judaism may have the wisest response to this question, which is essentially, "Since there's no way we can know, isn't it foolish to speculate?"

Since I'm not Jewish, though, I like to engage in a little "foolish speculation" now and then. I think it's an interesting subject, actually. Why? Let me put it this way: If you were to ask someone what their concept of God is, and what they think is the purpose of life on earth, you're probably going to get a blank stare followed by a lot of stuttering and sputtering. These are huge, abstract questions that are difficult for any of us to put into words. However, if you were to ask a person, instead, what their best guess is about the afterlife, they may offer a lot of caveats about how no one can know for sure, but once they moved beyond the caveats into their honest ideas, you'd get a very clear picture of their concept of God and sense of life's purpose! Try it for yourself sometime.

What's your best guess at what the afterlife might be like?

It's not fair of me to ask you such a question unless I throw down my views, too. I want to offer a couple of thoughts that do not concern the specifics of the afterlife so much as the general principles that may govern it. Then I'll offer what the afterlife would look like if I had a chance to design it myself.

One belief that is shared by many but not by me is that the afterlife is governed by the Law of Karma. That is, the principle that you get back that which you give out in this life. All of it – the “good, the bad, and the ugly.”

I do see a lot of truth in this idea, at least from the standpoint that the decisions we make, and the actions we take, really do matter, both now and later. I also like how karma would solve one of life’s biggest questions. Namely, how can God allow the unrighteous to thrive and the righteous to suffer? The Law of Karma would suggest that nobody gets away with anything in the long run. Nor does any good deed fail to be rewarded – if not in this life then the next.

Jesus himself seems to ascribe some karma-like quality not just to the afterlife but to this one, when he commands:

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." (Luke 6:37-38)

What makes me a fan of karma, but not a believer in it, is that Jesus may have had a lot to say about how we should behave, but he spoke even more about God’s love and grace.

The best definition of grace I’ve ever heard is, “Receiving something you don’t deserve, and not receiving something you do deserve”! The God who Jesus reveals is a God who is not just gracious, but supremely gracious. Jesus’s life and teachings, and his death and resurrection, were all about grace. In fact, what separates Christianity from other world religions is that Christianity puts a much stronger emphasis on grace.

If God’s grace is true, then the Law of Karma does not ultimately apply. When we die, God’s grace suggests that we receive more blessings than we actually deserve. Nor do we receive as much “punishment” (the better word is “correction”) as our actions on earth might warrant.

The apostle Paul spent his entire ministry preaching constantly about God’s grace. His preaching carried over into his speculation about the afterlife, which is about grace through-and-through:

*We know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven—God-made, not handmade—and we’ll never have to relocate our “tents” again. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move—and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what’s coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we’re tired of it! We’ve been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what’s ahead. The Spirit puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we’ll never settle for less.*

*That’s why we live with such good cheer. You won’t see us drooping our heads or dragging our feet! Cramped conditions here don’t get us down. They only remind us of the spacious living conditions ahead. It’s what we trust in but don’t yet see that keeps us going. Do you suppose*

*a few ruts in the road or rocks in the path are going to stop us? When the time comes, we'll be plenty ready to exchange exile for homecoming. (2 Corinthians 5:1-8 – The Message)*

If grace is true, then Paul's speculation of the afterlife may very well be right. But if the Law of Karma is true, then there is no way that Paul is even close. We've all got a lot more payback to live through before we ever get to anything close to what Paul describes.

The concept of Karma is closely related to another popular belief I do not share: a belief in reincarnation – that we live a number of lives here on earth before moving on to something higher.

I must admit that my disbelief in reincarnation may very well be the product of “wishful thinking”! As much as I love this world, I have absolutely zero desire to come back for another round, let alone twenty more. We just never seem to progress very far in this realm. I mean, we learn a lot of important things, and we grow spiritually (we hope), but there seems to be a threshold of goodness or righteousness that we cannot move beyond in this life. We can be loving and compassionate here, but we never seem to live up to our potential no matter how long we live or how saintly we are. We can be wise, patient, generous, and forgiving, but again, we can only take these qualities so far before they break down.

It may come as a surprise, but the Bible contains certain passages that at least hint at the concept of reincarnation. In the gospels, we learn that people thought John the Baptist was a reincarnation of a former prophet, for instance. We also learn that people thought the same thing about Jesus. This tells us that the idea of reincarnation was not foreign to biblical Israel.

There's also the whole idea of bodily resurrection that has been part of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam since ancient times. That's not reincarnation in the way we commonly understand it – as in, being born over and over again until you finally escape the wheel of life. But the Abrahamic belief in resurrection is a belief in literal re-incarnation. As in, putting flesh back on bones. Only in the view of these faiths, it only happens once, at the end of history.

What is my own speculation about the afterlife? Bottom line, I think Paul was right. Whatever the specifics, the overarching theme governing the afterlife is that love wins. And wins big. All of us will find our true home in God. We won't get there without being fundamentally transformed by love working through God's grace, but we'll all get there nonetheless.

That's about all I can say with certainty about the afterlife, or at least as much certainty as a person can have without going there. But I am willing to share with you briefly what the afterlife would look like if I could *write my own ticket*, so to speak:

If I could ask God for any kind of afterlife I wanted, I would not choose to suddenly be uploaded into Paradise – not even if there was a Coneflower Creamery shop on every corner. (If you haven't been to Coneflower in the Blackstone district, you won't know how strong a statement I'm making!) I might enjoy a little Paradise for a brief period of time after I leave this world, but mostly I would want to be there just long enough to recharge my battery and get my spiritual carburetor cleaned.

No, the world I would like to awaken into when I die is one that looks exactly like Earth, only all of us lives a bit more in accordance with how life was intended to be lived here. We love God a little more. We love our neighbor a little more. And we love ourselves a little more. And we are quicker to give, and receive, grace.

Imagine living in a world, for instance, where there was no theft nor bloodshed. Just these two aspects differ from life as we know it now. Wouldn't this be an incredible place to live?

No doors are ever locked.

No one tries to take what isn't theirs.

No telephone scams.

No jails.

No concern about walking dark streets at night or protecting yourself or others from harm.

No more Memorial Day because there is no more warfare.

And all the resources that we would normally devote to preventing theft, murder, and warfare would go instead to peaceful, life-promoting projects.

In this enhanced environment, I'd be happy to continue to be limited by a physical body rather than becoming pure spirit. I'd be happy to deal with natural disasters and disease. I would even be happy to continue to be limited in my awareness of God ... if only I could return to a place like this and live life as it was supposed to be lived.

Offer me this kind of scenario and I would be happy to die again and again, being born each time into a little better version of the world than we currently inhabit. Give me about fifty or sixty million years of these little deaths and rebirths, and then we can start thinking about what *eternal* life could look like.

For now – that is, *right now* – I'll just be content to envision what life would be like if I lived in a world where we were all a little closer to God and each other ... then try to live my life *now* as I would like to live *then*.