

“Eight Wonders of Life: Life, Death, & Epiphanies”
Romans 14:8 & John 8:31-32

As you walked in, you received a death deck card. This is from a game I learned about through our partnership with Crossroads House. The idea behind it is to broach the topic of death with your loved ones and to open the door for some frank conversations about death and their wishes. Since death is a difficult topic for us, we often avoid talking about it with our loved ones. We just don't know what to say. We have tough associations with death as we often think of our loss. I am grateful that two years ago, we had Dr. Christopher Kerr here with us in Batavia to share with us his medical research about the experience of those who are dying instead of our normal perspective which is only as observers. Here is a short clip from his TED Talk on this topic:

<https://youtu.be/rbnBe-vXGQM>

What Dr. Kerr and others often tell us is that death can be a very powerful and spiritual process for people. And so we approach this topic today because stories and experiences of birth and death are 7th on the list of the sources of awe for us as human beings according to Dacher Keltner's research in his book *Awe*. Keltner: “Awe helps us understand the cycle of life and death...In our twenty-six-culture study, no matter their religion, politics, culture, level of medical care, or life expectancy, people told stories about being awestruck by the beginning of life and its early unfolding –and about being moved in transcendent ways by watching the end of life.” One of the big things that happens in both birth and death is the expansion of our horizons. Parents often feel that deep sense of amazing connection to all of life through the birth of a child. The same is true for those who are dying. They feel an expansiveness and often report transcendent experiences from dreams to visions to signs.

In faith, we know that when we look at death through the eyes of those who are dying, we peer into the mystery of eternity. The Apostle Paul puts this beautifully in his letter to the Romans in these words from Romans 14:8 “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.”

Paul used these words to expand the vision of the church leaders in Rome from the small concerns of their egos which were manifested in the conflict between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. He knew that this reminder about the awe of life and death can help put things in a larger context for the church. Instead of focusing on the arguments they were having, he knew that what they needed was a dose of awe inspired by the presence of God, which is eternal and transcends the boundaries of life and death.

What came to my mind as I read Paul's words is the challenge of always keeping things in eternal perspective. One of the ways to do this when we are stuck is by asking ourselves, “How do I see this in light of eternity?” This kind of question expands our vision of life and frees us from some of the concerns and worries of our egos.

Jesus spoke about this kind of deep truth of life in his words in John 8:31-32:

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

When we experience such larger truths of life, we often find ourselves in awe of the universe and all the wisdom that makes it flow. Jesus was interested in helping his followers to be citizens of the kingdom of God and to act out of that birthright. Each of us is created in the image of God to live and to flow with the power of God's love in the world. This is the truth of who we are. This is the truth Jesus came to proclaim and to help people experience. The challenges of life and of our egos often cloud this truth for us. The path of faith is about reclaiming this for us and for others so that we may live to be the people God created us to be.

So the 7th and 8th wonders of life "stories of life and death" and "epiphanies" are connected. Both types of wonders lead us to a sense of awe that helps us to move beyond our small perspective of life.

When we get a sense of epiphany, we realize that we are a part of something larger than ourselves. This truth of life sets us free to love without holding back. When we know it in our bones, we are not easily shaken by the fears and worries of life.

What helps you to experience that transcendent connection to something larger than yourself? How might the cycle of birth and death help you to feel that sense of awe instead of fear and dread?

Dacher Keltner notes that: "WE are part of systems larger than the self...Awe is about knowing, sensing, seeing, and understanding fundamental truths, and leads to epiphanies across the eight wonders of life –transforming how we see the essential nature of the world. Awe begins with our miraculous eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin responding to the images, sounds, scents, tastes, and touches of the eight wonders of life...Around the world, people were awestruck by philosophical insights, scientific discoveries, metaphysical ideas, personal realizations, mathematical equations, and sudden disclosures... that transform life in an instant."

We will listen to the words of scripture again with the invitation to open our hearts to that deep sense of awe. I will read these scriptures twice. As you listen, I invite you look at your life through these words:

Romans 14:8

"If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

John 8:32 "³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

“May today there be peace within. May you trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith in yourself and others. May you use the gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you. May you be content with yourself just the way you are. Let this knowledge settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love. It is there for each and every one of us." ...”

— Saint Terese of Liseaux