

**“In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us.”**

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church on  
Sunday April 24, 2016 by Catherine Somerville.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Further on in that Genesis narrative we are told that “God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:1, 31)

Those are the opening words of our sacred story, and at the beginning of it all, we learn that life is good. Today, the reading from Revelation is about the end of the story. It is a vision of the living God dwelling in us. “I saw a new heaven and a new earth;... the home of God is among the people. God will dwell with them as their God....He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. See, God is making all things new, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.” (Rev. 21:1, 34, 6)

We believe that God is at the beginning of all things, and we believe too, that God is at the conclusion of all life. As a people of faith, we know that Jesus Christ is with us. We are not alone, and his self-giving love, his death and his resurrection give us hope as we move through the course of our days. That is the faith we carry.

So here we are, somewhere between the good beginning and the good ending, in the middle of the story.

We all know that life does not always seem good. When our lives are full and busy, bursting with meaning and purpose and health, however you define those things, life is good. But when life becomes a story of loss and diminishment, soured relationships, hurts and disappointments, or prolonged and debilitating illness, then life can seem unjust, and senseless. There might be days of futility, times of deep soul searching, and times for asking tough questions. There are times when failure and disappointment cloud any vision of goodness we try to hang onto.

Part of my job is to wait with people as they die. Sometimes it is a lovely thing. Family come from across the city, and all over the country. They set vigil. They laugh and cry and tell stories. There are incredible grace moments as

death approaches, when prayer is offered, forgiveness and remorse are expressed, gratitude is given voice. But there are other times, when the waiting is excruciating; counting the seconds between breaths as the life force slowly leaves the body. Sometimes no one is there to keep watch. Some people die alone.

A couple of weeks ago, one of you approached me after church in the coffee time. You told me that you were wondering what the United Church of Canada has to say about assisted dying.

Last year, Kay Carter, 89 years old and suffering from spinal stenosis, challenged the law prohibiting doctor assisted dying. In the last 25 years, we have heard many stories of people applying to the courts for the right to die. Two names we have heard about are Sue Rodriguez and Gloria Taylor. Both women suffered from ALS - Lou Gehrig's disease. They wanted a medical expert to assist their dying. Late last year, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the law prohibiting medical aid in dying, and we are now waiting for June 6<sup>th</sup>, to hear what the new law will be.

The government has proposed Bill C-14, the Medical Assistance In Dying law. It is seen by most people as a compromise bill, whereby Canadian citizens must adhere to five exacting criteria:

- be at least 18 years of age;
- have a serious and incurable illness, disease, or disability, where their suffering cannot be relieved; death is foreseeable;
- they must make a voluntary request
- they must give informed consent to receive assistance;
- and they must be covered under provincial health insurance, a move to prevent suicide tourism by non-Canadians.

Safeguards have been put in place including written consent, a 15 day waiting period, and the requirement for two independent medical opinions to be obtained, about the decision. Opponents to this bill are raising concerns about those not fitting inside these parameters: minors, the mentally ill, those with disabilities, and those diagnosed with dementia putting advance consent in

place to a future assisted death while still mentally competent. The bill says nothing about health care professionals, who have conscientious objections, or about church based health care institutions that refuse to comply. Those details are being left up to the provinces and territories to decide.

Justice Minister Jody Wilson Raybould has been quoted as saying, “It is a complex and deeply personal issue for Canadians of all ages and backgrounds”, and “The federal government is committed to including Canadians and taking the time to develop a thoughtful, sensitive, and well-informed response.”

Those are the details, but let’s get back to the question: What does our denomination have to say? We are hearing a lot about the Roman Catholic perspective. In a nutshell, and I am sorry that this is so brief, I do hope you will take the time to speak with your Catholic friends and read up, because their position requires thoughtful consideration. The Catholic position is that medically assisted dying is a form of murder, prohibited by the fifth commandment. It is considered a grave offense against the dignity of the human person and it is against God, the author of human life.

The Catholic position is called natural law. Life is a gift from God, and birth, life and death should be respected and not interfered with. No human being has the authority to take the life of an innocent person, even if that person wants to die. They would say that the process of dying is spiritually important and should not be disrupted, that the time just before death is profoundly holy, and that it is a time for community to gather, witness, and offer support, so that we might face death with honesty and faith. They say that their position supports the common good of society, that we all live together, and we are all connected. We do not have a claim on death, and it is not up to us to decide when our life will end, any more than we decided when it began. They are strong advocates for proper end of life care.

The United Church of Canada is in the process of developing a statement on medically assisted dying, and currently a team (Bill is one of the leads on this) is hearing from different voices within our church. They do not expect to find consensus. I doubt we could find consensus in this small group. As a church though, we are aware that a recent readers’ poll in the United Church

Observer, our church's national magazine, found that the majority of respondents were in favour of physician assisted dying.

But, our moderator, the elected head of our church has offered some points for consideration, which have been submitted to the government's special committee.

We have to increase the quality of end of life care, and we must increase the capacity for pain management in our medical system.

Christian tradition holds life to be sacred, but it is not absolute. It is to be valued and protected, but we also must consider the quality of life for the individual and the community.

People know what is best for them, and they need to be consulted about end of life decisions. They need the support and accompaniment of others they can trust and who have their best interests at heart. When individuals lack family or friends, support can come from chaplains, social workers, elders, us-the church.

The final days of a person's life should be up to the person. Doctors can advise but they should not be the ones deciding.

The wholeness of a person, body, mind and spirit must be seen together.

Doctors must be allowed the right not to participate if they believe it is inappropriate to do so. If the doctor has objections to participation, the patient ought to be referred to another doctor.

Particular concern needs to be paid to those suffering from progressive diseases, such as ALS. There will come a time when they can no longer take personal action. If they choose to end their life, they might do so prematurely. They must be allowed to choose when it is time to die.

There is also particular concern for those living with dementia, who are vulnerable, and may be coerced or led unconsciously towards a decision. We must hold onto the wisdom that even when a person cannot remember their very self, there is still value in them. Sometimes their memories are carried by others, by family, faith communities, friends.

A former moderator, The Very Rev. Gary Paterson, expressed it all this way, and I think he is summing up fairly well what the United Church believes.

“Our creed says, “In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. Both life and death are part of the whole created order. The United Church’s tradition is not to suggest that believing in the sanctity of life means that any attempt to end life must be prevented. Instead, what we are called to do is first listen to the struggles of those who are facing hard decisions and to make sure that they are not alone in those decisions, and second, we need to trust people with difficult choices about their own lives.”

We listen.

We walk with one another.

We trust people to make their own choices.

We support them as best we can.

The quality, not just the quantity, but the quality of our lives matter.

We must give extra care to the most vulnerable in our midst.

As a church, we believe that life is good. It is very, very good. We believe that God is with us, in life and in death. We are not alone. We believe that Jesus is our beginning and our end, and his life offers us guidance and perspective. We believe that hope is essential, and that faith and love always have the last word. We believe that comfort and peace are sacred gifts, and that memories must be held with gentle hands.

God, hear our prayer. Give us patience and faith in times of loss that we may come to understand the wonders of your healing power and the mystery of your love. Give us a vision of your purpose and such assurance of your love and strength that we may every hold fast the hope which is in the Risen Christ. God, hear our prayer. Amen.

Sources Used:

\*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, pages 466-469

\*Letter to the Special Joint Committee on Physician Assisted Dying from The Right Rev. Jordan Cantwell, February 19, 2016

\*Articles and editorials from The Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, and The Sudbury Star

\*Celebrate God’s Presence, page 459