

Death is a part of life. In fact, we wouldn't be alive without it. Cells are dying all the time in our bodies. And they are not random deaths — they are programmed deaths for our own good. Look at your hand. It has five fingers because the cells that used to live between them died way back when you were an embryo. Embryos as small as eight to 16 cells in size depend on cell death — if it did not occur, our human development would go off course. You might say that if it were not for death, we would not even be born.

Cell death is what keeps us from being overrun with cancer. Natural surveillance systems — such as the one involving the p53 protein, nicknamed “the guardian of the genome” — detect almost all cancerous mutations and direct the affected cells to commit suicide. These cancer cells die so that we might live. You might say that the human body stays alive, in large part, because of death. Certain cells die because of the benefit this brings to the greater whole.

As followers of Christ, you can probably guess where I am going with this. Jesus as the one who helped give us life knows that there is an upside to death, which is why he says to his disciples, in our Gospel this morning, that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.” He declares this quite openly, like a biology teacher giving a lecture on cellular mitosis. But Peter has never heard such

outrageous talk before, so he takes Jesus aside and tries to silence him. Jesus then turns the tables on Peter and rebukes him, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!”

Jesus knew that “the Son of Man” must undergo great suffering and be killed. He understood that he must die because of the benefit it would bring to the greater whole. Jesus dies to pay the price for our sins. Jesus dies to reconcile us to God. Jesus dies to show us how much God loves us. Jesus dies to call us to follow him in suffering service. Jesus dies to achieve victory over death. Jesus dies so that we might live.

Like programmed cell death, the death of Jesus brings benefit to the greater whole. It may look like foolishness to the world, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” The challenge for us, is to see how we can find the upside of death in the lives we live each day. This is not to say that we have to live in a state of constant loss and grief in this world, but it does mean that we are to find a way to respond to the call of Jesus when he says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me!” In other words, to become a follower of Jesus means being willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of all. It means being willing to deny ourselves for the benefit of the larger human entity.

A man named Thomas Cannon did this in a truly remarkable way. He was a postal worker in Richmond, Virginia, who lived much of his life on the edge of poverty so that he could give to those in need. Describing himself as “a poor man’s philanthropist,” he gave away more than \$150,000 to people who were experiencing hard times, or who had been unusually kind or brave. He gave these gifts over the last 33 years of his life, mostly in \$1,000 checks.

He traced his inspiration to his time in the Navy. While he was away at signal school, there was a shipboard explosion at the Port of Chicago, and many of his shipmates were killed. He concluded that he was spared for a reason — to help others be role models, to inspire people to see what he called “the oneness of it all.”

Cannon gave to people of all ages, races, nationalities and incomes. He gave checks to a low-income woman who started a youth center in her apartment complex ... to a retired postal worker who was a regular volunteer at an elementary school ... to a woman and man who wanted to return to Vietnam to visit their hometown ... to an advocate for the victims of crime ... and to a teenager who had been abandoned as an infant, but grew up to be named Virginia’s Youth of the Year.

This generosity did not come without sacrifice. Cannon supported his wife, his two sons, himself and his charitable efforts on a salary that never exceeded \$20,000 a year. When he retired from the postal service in 1983, he and his wife lived near the poverty line on his pension. “We lived simply,” he said before his death back in 2005, “so we could give money away.”

To become a follower of Jesus means to be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of all. It means to be willing to deny ourselves for the benefit of the larger human organism. It means, in the words of Thomas Cannon, to “help somebody.”

So how do we do this? Let’s look again at the cells in our body, and as we do so we should consider the idea that the upside of death involves seeing the big picture, fighting the good fight, and knowing when to get out of the way. Put these activities together, and you can discover what it means to deny yourself and follow Jesus. You can also see how those who lose their lives for the right reasons will actually save their lives for all eternity.

First we need to learn to see the big picture. Back when you were an embryo, the cells that held your fingers together did not have the luxury of being obsessed with their own survival. They had to die, so that your five-fingered human hand could emerge. This pattern was repeated by Thomas Cannon, when

he saw that his own individual comfort was not as important as “the oneness of it all.” And most significantly, Jesus discovered that his own death on the cross was at the very heart of God’s plan of salvation.

Now it’s true that this plan didn’t make sense to everyone around Jesus. Peter thought it was insane, because his mind was set on human things. But the cross was something that Jesus was prepared to face, because he saw it as part of the divine plan, God’s big picture! Which begs the question, where is it that we need to expand our vision of God’s plan for us?

It may be that we need to “die” to the idea of being the brightest star in a galaxy of stars. We see the big picture, and we’d like to be a big part of that picture. But in order to do so, it takes a “death” of self, and perhaps our pride, to be willing to work on the big plan, or to be a part of God’s great work around the world; by working in our own little corner of that world without the world necessarily paying any particular notice to us. And sometimes it also requires that we let go of any earthly expectations or our human desires we possess.

Second we need to remember that we are called to fight the good fight; that we should learn to pick our battles. Lots of energy can be expended on fights that — at the end of the day — don’t really matter. Our bodies are healthy when our cells are fighting the good fight, and our bodies are not healthy when our cells are

not fighting that fight. Back to Thomas Cannon. He routinely sent \$1,000 checks to people who were kind, or courageous, so that they could continue to do good work in the world.

Similarly, Jesus challenges us to take a stand for him, even when pressure is put on us to deny him: at work, in school, in public, when we are surrounded by people with beliefs that might be different from our own, and in perhaps even in our personal relationships. This can be a struggle. Who wants to fight? The whole notion of fighting is a very unpopular metaphor in our culture these days, unless we have been truly hurt, or wronged in some way, and still fill the urge for payback.

But, unless we thrive on adrenalin, or we like to live life on the edge, we'd rather not fight. We'd rather not be in the game, but rather be watching the game. We'd rather not be in training, but admire those who are. We'd rather not deprive ourselves, but indulge ourselves. It takes a "death" of self to be willing to cowboy up and get the job done. Jesus calls us to this fight and warns us that if we are ashamed of him, and his words, then he will be ashamed of us as well.

Before Thomas Cannon's death, he asked that no foundation be set up to keep his name alive. He knew that when his work on this earth was over, it was

over. And Jesus tells us that those who save their life will lose it, but “those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Finally, we need to learn how to get out of the way! In the life of the church, sometimes people have a hard time with this. Older pastors want their distinctive approaches to be remembered and repeated. Retired church members want the hymns of their childhood to be sung regularly in worship. Baby boomers want their children to follow their examples, and Gen-Xers are perplexed by the approaches of the Millennials that follow them. At some point, each of us has to remember that the church of Jesus Christ has been handed to us, and our job is to hand it over to the people who follow us. To let go, and get out of the way, is a tremendous act of faith, showing the world that the church belongs to Christ, and not to us!

Of course, the hardest part of knowing when to get out of the way involves a willingness for someone else to get the credit, or at the very least, not being overly concerned with receiving recognition. It takes a “death” of self, in order to be utterly unconcerned about the glory, but radically concerned about the blessing. The only credit report we need to worry about, is the one God keeps, and only God is privy to its contents.

Death is a part of the Christian faith. In fact, there would be no faith without it. We need a cross before an empty tomb, a Good Friday before an Easter morning, and the execution of the Son of Man before the resurrection of the Son of God. That's the upside of death! So.....as we continue our journey during the season of lent; let us strive to see the big picture, let us fight the good fight, and let us remember to deny ourselves by getting out of the way and allowing Christ to lead us, and work through us, to share his love and mercy with the world around us. That is the way of baptism. We are called to daily die to self only to rise again to a new life with Christ. Amen.