

**“Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”**  
1 Corinthians 15:55

By Chaplain Sunday Pearson

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As a chaplain, I have witnessed death up close. It just seems that in only the blink of an eye we depart this realm; one breath only seemingly separates us from eternity. The reality is, of course, that we do not die in one breath. Dying is a progression and it begins the moment we emerge from the womb.

Being in ministry, I officiate funerals. I often hear myself try to neatly package the end of a person’s life in such a way that it becomes palatable for those left behind who grieve. I use words like: ‘she is at peace;’ ‘he is no longer suffering;’ or ‘they are together enjoying the company of a grandparent, a sibling or an aunt or uncle.’ How do I know this with absolute certainty? Truly, it is only by faith that I believe my own words; faith in a loving and gracious Heavenly Father who says in Hebrews 13:5. “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.”

In 2006, I took my first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE.) By all rights, I shouldn’t have been there. I wasn’t a seminary student at that time and frankly, I didn’t even have an undergraduate degree but for reasons known only to God, I found myself at the Veterans Hospital in Mather, California enrolled in 400 hours of CPE. God had miraculously opened my first door to the chaplaincy and I have never looked back.

I was probably mid-way through my internship, and had already seen a fair amount of deaths. Seasoned? No not really but it is safe to say that I no longer felt that overwhelming sense of dread and angst when I responded to a ‘Code Blue’ emergency.

On this particular occasion, a distraught mother requested a chaplain for her Viet Nam era son. Sadly, I had visited way too many men just like her child. All of whom fought a controversial war they didn’t believe in only to return home with no sense of purpose, surrounded by a nation of people who didn’t know how to welcome them back.

From the moment he left the southeast Asia war, like so many others, the battles raged on in his mind; day after day, year after year. He self-medicated using alcohol and drugs but they never quieted the demons that played havoc in his head. On this day, the *medication* he used for years caught up with him and his body could no longer sustain itself. It was shutting down, and there was nothing the doctors could do.

His mother was alone and it just broke my heart to see her grieve. As much as she loved her son, she simply could not bring herself to watch him slowly die as they

took him off of life support. She asked if I would stay with him, and I told her I would be honored to do so.

As the nurses disconnected him from a myriad of devices leaving only the blood pressure machine to woefully keep account, I held on to the side of his bed with both hands. I prayed softly; perhaps a loud whisper, and I stroked his heavily tattooed left arm. I remember that I prayed the Lords prayer. His blood pressure was so low. I don't remember the exact reading at the time but I glanced up and recollect seeing the bottom number somewhere in the low 20's.

I prayed that God would be merciful and then for some reason that I do not recall, I spoke his name out loud. As I did so, he shockingly turned his head left in the direction of my voice. The movement actually frightened me. His vitals were incredibly low so physiologically speaking, this should never have happened. I stepped back for a moment to gather myself and honestly, it took every ounce of courage I had just to step back to the bed.

Since I now believed that somehow he was able to hear me and to respond to my voice, I prayed even louder. In retrospect, I don't recall everything I said but I do remember very distinctly telling him to "go towards the light; don't be afraid, go to Jesus." I went on to tell him that God loved him so much that he sent His Son who died on the cross for all of our sins and that if he would believe this, he would live eternally in Heaven. I continued to encourage him from my vantage at the side of the bed until the shrill of the blood pressure machine was constant and the indicator line went flat.

And there I stood. I was pretty shaken. For a long time I didn't tell anyone what happened because I didn't know how it could possibly have occurred. And then I questioned if it had happened at all? The answer, of course, I knew to be yes. Although I couldn't explain any of it, I knew with intuitive certainty that the man I ministered to that day somehow hung in the balance between this world and the next and that for some reason, I was privileged to be there with him.

I have since ministered to others who were dying. In spite of the numbers, death remains a mystery to me. I suppose it always will until I personally bid this life adieu. Suffice it to say, I am not afraid of death mostly due to the overwhelming certainty of my value in Christ that assures me that when my body gives out and I step into eternity, I will be holding Jesus' hand. The gospel of grace calls out that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God made visible in Jesus; I cling to that promise.

So it is that everything else will indeed pass away but the love of Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever and in the end of my life and yours, He is the only person we can hang onto. The love of the Father and the Son is stronger than death and endures . . . forever. James 4:8 reminds us to "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." My prayer is that like me, you too rest in that assurance.