

“Buried Alive”
I Kings 17:17-23, Ephesians 2:1-10, Luke 7:18-23
October 6, 2019

Sigmund Freud hasn't been too kind to religion. It's taken decades and some rethinking for his successors to wear down the hostility that psychiatry and religious faith have had for each other. In fact, many Freudians still insist that the religious impulse is, on balance, a negative in the fight for mental health, though one of his successors, Karl Jung, demonstrated just the opposite.

Despite the discomfort of associating Freud with this pulpit, there is an idea of his that I'd like to mention for two reasons. First is that it is something most of us have heard of and can understand and relate to, while secondly the concept itself makes sense. What I'm talking about is what Freud called the “death wish.”

By the “death wish” Freud did not mean that we are in a hurry to die. It's a bit more subtle than that. He recognized, rather, that human beings often yearn to escape from the burden of being alive. We wish we were free of life's stresses, uncertainties, and demands. We long for quiet oblivion, like a Buddhist striving for Nirvana. Freud, to my mind, was right on the button. Remember the play “Stop the World, I Want to Get Off”? There's the Death Wish! Or how about the proverbial yuppie, whose entire focus is on E.R. - early retirement - when freedom from noise, decisions, clocks, set-backs, obligations, and disappointments, finally comes around.

Yet not too many people are ready to pick up the phone to call Montano-Shea Funeral Home with the request, “Take me away!” No matter how much we wish to “be at rest,” we cannot completely shake our lust for life. Even when the pressures are the greatest, gnawing at our insides is the suspicion that we are important - that our life means something - to ourselves, to those around us, and to God.

Although life often tells us that we cannot have our cake and eat it too - that we cannot have it both ways - we human beings are a resourceful bunch. We have found a

compromise, a release, from being caught between the desire to be at rest and our passion to be fully alive.

You see, we simply bury ourselves in a shallow grave and say, "I'll just rest here and come out every now and then." So like my paternal grandmother Lillian, we pile on the soil and bury ourselves - in busy-ness, useless activities, misspent recreation, empty projects, and God-knows what else ... Endless, but mindless, motion. In effect, we bury ourselves alive. And our own hands are the shovels. We rest in our homemade graves until some person or some event comes along and calls us to come out and LIVE, much as Jesus called into a tomb, "Lazarus, come forth!"

There's an odd little story that the Scottish theologian William Barclay tells in his commentaries that illustrates, for me, one of the compliments that can be paid a preacher. The story is not spiritually profound, yet it speaks of personal transformation. A minister found that there was an elderly woman in his congregation who lived in a cellar in filthy conditions. Now this woman was poor, and a cellar was all she could afford. Most of the church knew how she lived, but little could be done - the poor we will always have with us, right? After some months of his preaching, a Deacon went to call on the woman. But the cellar was empty. The Deacon knew she had not died - she had just been in church the day before. She was finally tracked down in an attic apartment, living under the eaves. It was cramped, as had been her cellar. And it was hot in summer up there, just as it had been cold in winter down below. She was still very poor and there were no luxuries. But the attic was as light and airy and clean as the cellar had been dark and dismal and dirty. "I see you've changed your house," said the Deacon. "Yes - you cannot hear George Matheson preach and live in a cellar," was her reply.

An ideal had been rekindled, somehow. The desire to live with pride, with dignity, with self-respect, as a child of God, just a little lower than the angels, had been brought home to her. She had climbed out of a grave, one made with her own hands. She was alive.

The effort does not end with one's self, however. Just as we bury ourselves spiritually, or even almost literally as the old woman had done, so too are others buried. And we, as the church, as the body of Christ, have an obligation to them.

In our Old Testament lesson the prophet Elijah comes to the home of a widow and her sick boy. I think the story is familiar to many of us, how the widow's oil and flour never ran out as she takes care of God's messenger.

It is the run-up to the story, however, that interests me. Elijah is on the run. The powers-that-be consider him a dangerous agitator, and he is no longer welcome in society. And so Elijah escapes to the wilderness from the long arm of the law. But trouble follows him in the form of drought and famine which threaten his life.

Up to this point Elijah has been worried primarily about one thing - his own personal survival. But focus on self is not what a child of God is called to. And so the Almighty drives Elijah into the hands of people more desperate than he is, namely, the widow and her boy.

NOW Elijah realizes that it is his task not to worry so much about his own skin, but instead to bring the blessings of being alive to others. He must raise others out of their difficulties, for in that lies the calling of service. And so Elijah saves a family from starvation, and the boy from deadly illness.

NOW is Elijah truly alive, all the more valuable than when he was brooding over his own misfortunes by himself. Now make no mistake - Elijah's personal problems have not changed. He is still a public enemy of the Crown. But he has changed the circumstances of others, bringing light and goodness where there had been only darkness, despair, and the grave.

Two thousand years ago, John the Baptist asked of Jesus, "Are you the One who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus said John should consider the evidence: how through Him the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor learn the Good News - in short, how people are coming alive.

People are still asking John the Baptist's question: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" We ask it of politicians, of religious leaders, of institutions. We ask it of medical science, of Madison Avenue, of drug dealers offering instant happiness. People search, wanting to live more fully, no longer to be buried alive. And they ask it of the Christian church.

How do we answer them? Can we answer them? And what evidence do WE show, as did Jesus, that we can rescue others, as did Elijah, from being buried alive? Or are we in our own self-made graves, piling on the soil with our own hands serving as shovels? How can WE promise salvation to others, if we cannot even save ourselves? If we proclaim that faith can move mountains, perhaps we should begin by moving a bit of earth from atop our own selves, lest we become buried alive. Then freed from the grave, we can do what we are called to do - to bring the blessings of life to others.

Let us pray: