

Baptist Sermon

“Organ Donation: A Biblical Perspective”

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An Act of Redemption

This world has not turned out as God intended. God, the Creator, suffers at the condition of His handiwork. The world as we see it today hardly resembles the perfect creation that God spoke into existence. Crime, hunger, death, and disease were not present at creation, but due to man's fall in the garden, adversity has found a home in every human soul.

God, the Creator, invites all those who would be His to suffer with Him. We are compelled to bear our burdens with the purifying hope that suffering will not have the last word. Even the most timid Christian must stand on the promise that ultimate and unconditional triumph awaits those that love the Lord. Our Faith must fasten on the fact that no matter how severe the suffering, God will redeem the situation and utilize it for our good.

Since suffering is inevitable for both God and man, God has created a redeeming value for suffering. The goodness of God will allow something positive to come out of a negative situation. God's greatest demonstration of this redemptive process is realized in His son. The death of Jesus Christ resulted in the redemption of the world. His finished work at Calvary restored the broken fellowship between God and His most precious creation, man. God has rescued creation and mankind from hopelessness with His redeeming love. Christ suffered the loss of His life, but it became the seed of the world's hope and joy.

Sooner or later suffering and sorrow comes to every home. No conditions of wealth, culture, or even religion can prevent it. But the losses and griefs of life have been intended to leave behind an abundance of character and blessings that will make eternity richer. In a Christian home sorrow should always leave a benediction. It should be received as God's messenger, and when it is, it will always leave a blessing.

Some treasures must be mined. They have to be discovered, realized. Blessings are often shrouded behind the veil of overwhelming grief. There are some tough places in this world, but nothing compares to the Intensive Care Unit waiting room where high levels of emotion and active grief can barricade any offer of redemption. Unfortunately, the only time requestors can approach a family about organ and tissue donations is in the midst of their grief and sorrow. Many people can only see grief as an enemy to whom they will refuse to be reconciled. They feel that they can never be comforted. For many families who consent to organ donation, it is a way of redeeming the loss of a loved one. In a situation where you feel victimized, the decision to donate gives the family a feeling of being in control. It gives life to others. Organ donation has helped families deal with their grief by bringing something positive out of a seemingly negative situation.

Not everyone dies in a way that allows vital organ donation. In fact, only 1 percent of people who die can be vital organ donors. Vital organ donors must be “brain dead” (a legal definition of death) and their organs mechanically sustained by a ventilator. If the decision ever becomes ours to consent for vital organ donation, we should consider why God has allowed such an opportunity.

The sweetest songs that have ever been sung have come out of fire. Sorrows should not be wasted. We should yield our rebellion, accept our suffering and discover if it has some mission to perform, some gift to give, some golden fruit to enjoy, some redeeming value.

A Sweet Fragrance in the House

In Mark, Chapter 14, we have the marvelous account of a woman breaking an expensive alabaster vase filled with spikenard, a priceless perfumed oil, and anointing Jesus with all of it. Her extravagance was criticized by Judas Iscariot and others in the house. But our Lord praised the sacrificial giving of this woman and declared her deed a memorial. Suppose she had left the expensive oil in the unbroken vase? Would there have been any mention of it? Would her deed of careful keeping and self-preservation been told all over the world? She broke the vase, poured its contents forth, lost it, sacrificed it, and now perfumed incense has drifted into every home where this message has been heard. We may keep our life if we will, carefully preserving it from waste, but we shall have no reward. However, if we empty it out in loving service, we shall make it a lasting blessing to the world and it shall be well spoken of forever.

By donating organs we unselfishly pour out the fragrant gift of life upon those awaiting a second chance at life through transplantation. The sweet fragrance of sacrificial giving will flow into the homes of transplant recipients whose lives were saved and/or improved through the gift of life.

The donation of organs should not only be regarded as a medical or secular good deed but also as a religious, sacramental extension of Christ's own life-giving sacrifice. Organ sharing is consistent with the beliefs of all major religions and is viewed as an act of charity, fraternal love and self-sacrifice.

In the St. Louis area, over a 22 month period, 55 percent of African American families approached to give consent for organ/tissue donation said yes. This percentage is significantly higher than the national average because of education and donor awareness programs in our city. Through unselfish giving, the sweet fragrance of life is enjoyed by transplant recipients, their families, and their friends.

The cross of Christ is not only substitutionary, but it is also representative. His life of humility and unselfishness should become a prototype for those who bear His name as Christians. We should follow His example by giving the gift of life so that others may live life more abundantly.

The Liberating Truth

Unfamiliarity with the truth concerning the donor process will hinder the decision to choose life in the face of death. Misconceptions, myths and mistrust of the medical community will eclipse our perspectives and leave us fearful and ignorant of facts. God tells us that His people perish because of the lack of knowledge. People are indeed perishing particularly African-Americans. A recent survey revealed that only 23 percent of blacks are willing to donate their organs after death compared to 47 percent of whites. Another truth is that African Americans have an unidentified biological susceptibility to hypertension and diabetes, the major causes of kidney failure. Consequently, blacks are 17 times more likely to develop kidney failure than whites.

While 70 percent of patients undergoing kidney dialysis are black, fewer than 10 percent of kidneys donated for transplants come from black donors. It is harder to get a good match using a kidney from a white donor for a black recipient. The truth is, if more blacks would donate, it would provide better matches and increased survival for other blacks.

The misconception, "I need all my organs intact to get to heaven," is totally non-scriptural. We are informed by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15:50 that, "...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." In eternity we will not have or need our earthly bodies. Old things will pass away and all things will be made new.

There is also some mistrust in the medical community. The myths that one could be declared dead prematurely just to gain organs or that you won't receive top medical care if you have a signed donor card are flights from reality. The fact is that no one becomes a donor until all life-saving measures have been exhausted. An open casket funeral is possible with any type of donation. There is no cost to the family for organ and tissue donation. If we would seek the truth about organ donation, the truth will liberate us not only to accept but also to give the gift of life. "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32)

Through Christ's spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether we be Jew or Gentile. In sharing one body, we cannot isolate ourselves from the hurts of humanity. We are called upon to "bear ye one another's burdens." While we can't save the world, we can sign donor cards on the back of our driver's license. To become a vital organ donor is to give life to as many as seven recipients. A tissue donor can help as many as 50 people.

Should you decide to give the gift of life, discuss it with your family, let them know of your wishes. Death, especially our own, is not something that we love to talk about, but in the last 2000 years no one has been able to escape it.

Death need not be the final comment of our lives. Instead of one stone marker at the head of our grave, there could be living memorials, real people with real families whose lives have been put back together through the gift of life. This is Christianity at its best: sharing one's own life for the purpose of helping someone else.

God, the creator of this world, has placed us as stewards of His creation. Being stewards, we cannot ignore the imperative to heal found in Matthew 10:8, "Heal the sick...freely ye have received, freely give."

Give the gift of life; it's the chance of a lifetime.

Baptist Sermon

"LIFE BEFORE DEATH"

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There is as much mystery about life as there is about death. In this western world of ours, we never really treat either of these realities with the respect that each of them deserves. Our acquired habits, customs, and attitudes tend to make light of life and death; attempts are too frequently made to gloss over the only two certainties that we have: life and death.

It is a painful exercise to watch generation after generation simultaneously disrespect life and death until each of them smacks us back into universal reality. It is no secret that societal pain killers blunt life, making people think all things are made possible with chemicals, legal and otherwise, in order to cope. Then, too, there is the ultimate pain killer-suicide. Neither of these choices corresponds to understanding, living and respecting life. Both may appeal to some, but that is not an answer for many. It never has been nor will it ever be.

Life's questions, its challenges, its pains, its hopes and triumphs reach beyond the immediate context of

the individual, family or community. We are constantly searching for answers, though at times they are just that—answers, not solutions. Answers are not solutions, only ways to them. And in order to move toward solutions, we need life. We need life even in the middle of terrible hardship and pain. Without life there can be no answers and clearly no solutions to life's problems and challenges.

Part of the social means of coping with life's hardships was the church's emphasis on "life after death". That the suffering "servants" need not worry about the here and now; pain is only for a season. It was said, "The heavier burden, the brighter the crown." Of course we know that is nonsense in its purest form. But echoes of those words are still present. For the church it is important to live and practice the understanding of life taught by Jesus in the here and now.

In the text (John 10:10) Jesus uses a metaphor for death. A thief, thief in the night, as it were. Death is like a thief -- cunning, watching for another victim, universally detested. Stealing something of value, something it will never have on its own. That is like death -- approaching unaware, victims largely unprepared, unexpected in the "normal" course of things.

It robs just like a thief; it robs the riches of life, health and even youth because it robs life itself. No one knows this as sharply as those who are called upon to donate a loved one's organs after an unexpected death.

The "world" has caved in, life has been lost, the future denied and anguish is all consuming. There is no easy way to approach people in this situation of human tragedy. In actual fact, one suspects that is a matter of case-by-case, family by family.

The "miracle" of transplants is one thing. Our having the vocabulary to address grieving survivors is another. We are yet to have the full language, the words to adequately convey the transplant message except on a pathway that is still not complete.

It is almost solely through confronting reality, confronting life and death with courage and sensitivity, that we can have a vocabulary that will match the progress in transplants. This science will continue to develop; it will move on. We have to see to it that our words and our actions keep it human and move with it.

Giving permission is an act that contributes to the legacy of life. It emphasizes "life before death." It is an act of love that gives back to others what death took away; it gives back life. Donors have been known to save as many as six people who would have been without hope had not the transplants taken place.

Such a gift is really treating life and death with the seriousness each demands. It, in as sense, is a celebration of life itself, another act of creation. We need to give thanks in the language of God because with each new day we can take it as God's personal invitation to each of us on this planet earth that we have an opportunity to try and try again until we get it right. And what is it that we need so desperately to get right? That God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, that we as human beings have been ordained to have life and have it abundantly.

Source: SEOPF/UNOS. *Organ and Tissue Donation: A Reference Guide for Clergy*. 4th Ed. Cooper ML, Taylor GJ, eds. Richmond, VA: UNOS; 2000