

# LOVE AND DEATH

## Forrest Church

Preached at All Souls Church on February 3, 2008

Although I have delivered some thousand sermons on almost as many discrete topics, one way or another each circles back to a single theme. This tendency, I'm told, is not uncommon. Every minister worth his or her salt has one great sermon in them. It's no wonder that we return time and again to its familiar music and uplifting chords.

Even church administrators pick up on their bosses' penchant to repeat themselves. In certain instances, they have little choice. One of my storied colleagues, James Madison Barr of Memphis, Tennessee, had a habit of disappearing periodically, especially on Mondays and Tuesdays, when the office staff was composing and printing the weekly church newsletter. At the top of each newsletter, they included the sermon title for the following Sunday and a brief précis of its theme. Whenever Dr. Barr was missing in action and necessity forced the Memphis church administrator to be creative, she listed his forthcoming sermon as follows:

*"The Great Mystery"*

*James Madison Barr, Preaching*

*What Dr. Barr will be preaching about this Sunday is a mystery,  
but we're certain it will be great.*

Whether great or no, my recurring sermon, too, is rich with mystery. Time and again, I return to the abiding themes of love and death.

I do so this morning for personal reasons. Since there is no way, or call, to be artful about blunting this news, let me begin by reading you the letter I shall

send tomorrow to the members and friends of this wonderful church, whose destiny and mine have been interwoven now for so many years.

*Dear Friends,*

*After enjoying a year of fine health, this past Thursday I learned that my cancer had recurred, having spread to my lungs and liver. There is no way to sugarcoat this news. I shall undergo a regimen of chemotherapy, more for palliative than curative reasons, but must face the certainty that my cancer is terminal and the great likelihood that my future will be measured in months not years.*

*You have accompanied me on this journey from its beginning. What a comfort that has been. In matters of mortality, we are all companions (the word means, “those who break bread together”). From its very beginning, our repast has been a feast.*

*In more than one respect, I feel very lucky. In the fall of 2006, my family and I had a dress rehearsal for the drama we now are entering in earnest. My wife, Carolyn, and our four children, Frank, Nina, Jacob and Nathan were able then to begin working through the complex feelings that always accompany the loss of a family member, especially a parent. As for me, I have greeted every day since my reprieve (and shall greet the days to come) as gravy.*

*I won't predict how my body will hold up during the course of treatment, but I can tell you what I hope to do. Though all of our stories end in the middle, with unfinished business piled high, I should like to end my story, if I may, by summing up my thoughts on love and death in a book that might bring as much comfort to others as you have brought to me. In it, I shall share what I have learned from you during the three decades I have been privileged to serve as your minister. Time and again, at your loved*

*ones' deathbeds and together in my study, we have struggled to wrench meaning from loss, seeking to find our way through the valley of the shadow. Rarely acknowledging to yourselves (or even sensing) your great courage and remarkable insight, on occasions such as these you have taught me the lessons of a lifetime.*

*Over the weeks ahead, I shall keep Galen up to date on my progress. I'll also post occasional bulletins from the front on the All Souls website (Allsoulsnyc.org). I hope to return to the pulpit on Palm Sunday.*

*Since it would be remarkably unimaginative for me to die at fifty-nine as my father and grandfather each did before me, I shall do my utmost to make it to September, when, after rejoicing in my daughter's wedding, I shall celebrate both my sixtieth birthday and the completion of thirty years at All Souls.*

*In the meantime, know that my thoughts and prayers are with you.*

*With lots of love,*

*Forrest*

Goodness knows, I'd far rather listen to Galen preach his scheduled sermon this morning, or even hear Dr. Barr opine on "The Great Mystery," than be called on to share this news with you. With characteristic insight and generosity, however, Galen suggested that I might wish to share this news in person, and so here I am once again, preaching my familiar sermon, "Love and Death."

One of our longtime members, Damon Brant, has compiled a stunning book of photographs, a series of candid portraits that he took of his father in his death bed, with nurses and family at the bedside or waiting in the wings. Called simply, "Hospice," and free of textual adornment, Damon's unsentimental yet

deeply moving record touches the heart. Why does it move those who never knew Damon's father? Because his death is our death too. We are never closer than when we ponder the great mystery that beats at the heart of our shared being.

When grandparents, parents, even children died at home, death was an inescapable presence in our lives. Today, shielded from intimacy with death by the cold, mechanically invasive and antiseptic chambers of hospitals, we lose touch with how natural, even sacramental, death can be. If we insulate ourselves from death we lose something precious, a sense of life that does know death, that elevates human to humane, that reconciles human being with human loss.

The word human has a telling etymology: *human, humane, humility, humus*. Dust to dust, the mortar of mortality binds us fast to one another. All true meaning is shared meaning.

I've often said that I didn't become a minister until I performed my first funeral. When death or dying comes calling at the door, like a bracing wind it clears our being of pettiness. It connects us to others. More alert to life's fragility, we reawaken to life's preciousness. To be fully human is to care, and attending to death prompts the most eloquent form of caring imaginable.

At every deathbed, the light that shines is framed by darkness. When those we love die, a part of us dies with them. When those we love are sick, we too feel the pain. Yet all of this is worth it. Especially the pain. Grief and death are sacraments, or can be. A sacrament symbolizes communion, the act of bringing us together. To comfort another is to bring her our strength. To console is to be with him in his aloneness. To commiserate is to share her pain.

The act of releasing a loved one from all further obligations as he lies dying—to tell him it's all right, that he is safe, that we love him and he can go now—is life's most perfect gift, the final expression of unconditional love. We let go for dear life.

Adversity doesn't always bring out the best in people. But the reason it so often does is because adversity forces us to work within tightly drawn limits. Everything within those limits is heightened. We receive as gifts things we tend

to take for granted. For a brief, blessed time, what matters to us most really does matter.

Yet, how do we respond, when we get a terminal sentence? Far too often with, “What did I do to deserve this?”

“Nothing.” The answer is, “Nothing.” Against unimaginable odds, we have been given something that we didn’t deserve at all, the gift of life, with death as our birthright.

Unless we armor our hearts, we cannot protect ourselves from loss. We can only protect ourselves from the death of love. Yet without love, nothing matters. Break your life into a million pieces and ask yourself what of any real value might endure after you are gone. The pieces that remain will each carry love’s signature. Without love, we are left only with the aching hollow of regret, that haunting emptiness where love might have been.

Such is the story that unfolds frame by frame in Damon’s book. A man is dying. He has been given but a few sweet days to live. His wife and children gather at his bedside. They reminisce. They hold hands. They laugh. They cry. They wait. Their hearts tremble with love.

Damon’s pictures tell life’s deepest story. And each carries the same meaning. The most eloquent answer to death’s “no” is love’s “yes.”

In face of a terminal diagnosis, the question to ask is not “Why?” by the way. “Why?” will get us nowhere. The only question worth asking is ‘Where do we go from here?’ And part of its answer must include the word “together.” Everyone suffers. Yet not everyone despairs. Despair is a consequence of suffering only when affliction cuts us off from others. It need not. The same suffering that leads one person to lose all sense of meaning can as easily promote empathy, the felt experience of another’s pain. Hope is woven into the lifelines that connect us. As Damon’s book demonstrates so vividly, to see our own tears reflected in another’s eyes is the most holy of intimacies. We enter the sacred realm of the heart, where the one thing that can never be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.

The realm of the heart is not only where we touch each other most sacredly; it is also the place where we encounter the cosmic source for our sense of awe. Let me close by inviting you to enter that realm.

For us to be here in the first place, for us to earn the privilege of dying, more than a billion billion accidents took place. All our ancestors lived to puberty, coupled, and gave birth. Not just our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Take it all the way back to the beginning, beyond the first Homo sapiens back to the ur-paramecium. Even the one in a million sperm's connection with the equally unique egg is nothing compared to everything else that happened from the beginning of time until now to make it possible for us to be here.

What does this mean? Astoundingly, unbelievably, it means that we have been in utero from the beginning of the creation. We can trace ourselves back, genetically, to the very beginning of time. The universe was pregnant with us when it was born.

What a luxury we enjoy, wondering what will happen after we die, even what will happen before we die. Having spent billions of years in gestation, present in all that preceded us—fully admitting the pain and difficulty involved in actually being alive, able to feel and suffer, grieve and die—we can only respond in one way: with awe and gratitude.

And how does this affect the way we treat others? I hope it means we will treat others as being as unpredictable, unexpectable and amazing as we are. In the womb of the universe when God first gave birth, they too have run a billion billion gauntlets, emerging against almost impossible odds to walk here beside us on this planet. They are more than neighbors. They are kin, honest to God and hope to die kin.

Religion does its best (and worst) work here. Not in the creation chapter or the Armageddon chapter, but in the middle of the story, when all the actors are thrown together, struggling for meaning, none knowing as much as we pretend, think, or wish we knew. The wisest of all teachers tells us, "Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself." Even, "Love your enemy." He instructs us to love our brother, even if he doesn't know that he is our brother. Love our sister, even if

she doesn't know that she is our sister. Exchange pride for humility. Forgive without ceasing. And judge actions but not people, remembering—I would add—that somewhere they and we share at least one common ancestor who, with twenty-twenty hindsight, would do the same for us if she were here.

In fact, she is here. Those who have come before us must now use our hands to touch, our eyes to see. We carry them in our hearts and bones, we and our blood brothers and sisters, survivors of the miracle, of the ongoing miracle, never ceasing to amaze, pouring itself into new vessels, recreating itself, over and over again.

We see little of the road ahead or the sky above. And the dust we raise clouds our eyes, leaving only brief interludes to contemplate the stars. All we can do, every now and again, is to stop for a moment and look.

Look. Morning has broken and we are here, you and I, breathing the air, admiring the slant sun as it refracts through these magnificent, pellucid windows and dances in motes of dust above the pews, calling us to attention, calling us homeward.

Dust to dust.

Heart to heart.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.