

Hopes of the dying (1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38)

Death is inevitable for the living. It's also a requisite for that which is yet to live.

by [T. Denise Anderson](#)

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I just led a church through dissolution.

It had been a long time coming. The congregation had been losing members at a steady pace for years. They had gone through revitalization program after revitalization program to little avail. They had clashed with previous pastors who had seen the writing on the wall, and they had vehemently disagreed when those pastors encouraged them to make the faithful decision to close.

You see, they still had a little money in the bank and could keep going for a while, even though that reserve was quickly shrinking. Plus, they loved being together, and if they closed, who would bury them when they died?

And if people would just start coming to church regularly again, there would be no problems. Or, maybe if they called a different kind of pastor (me), their trajectory would shift, new people would come into the fold, and they would be able to relive the days when the church was packed. Maybe they could have two services again.

These are all hopes of the dying. Imagining life in any form other than what has been before is not an easy thing to do. But death is inevitable for the living. It's also a requisite for that which is yet to live.

In making his case for the resurrection of Christ, the Apostle Paul likens the body to a seed and reminds the church at Corinth that what is sown cannot come into life unless it dies. He is speaking to the anxiety humans naturally experience when confronted with death. It is instinctual to living things to preserve their life, because that is how life promulgates. It makes complete sense in this way—and the instinct doesn't stop at biological life, but extends to institutional life as well. Paul is telling the church that for life to occur, something must die.

This is what makes the gospel so scandalous, difficult, and nonsensical at times; it challenges our instinct.

For example, if someone slaps you, instinctually you are not inclined to let them do it again. You will shield your face from any following blows, or return force to discourage the assailant from further assaults. Jesus in his Sermon on the Plain encourages people who have been slapped to offer the other cheek to the assailant. Why? Why would I give more of my clothes to someone who has already taken so much? It makes no sense.

It seems these readings suggest that death is necessary for the reign of God to take place. More specifically, what must die is our insistence on holding onto the things we hold through instinct or socialization. We are being called to let go of our lives. To let go of our need to hold onto our space in the world, to let go of our reticence to be in different kinds of relationships with others. To trust that new and fuller life exists beyond what we can comprehend.

I don't think this makes the reign of God sound any more inviting, honestly. But it does invite us to consider the new life and new reality that might come from radically trusting and following God, despite what it costs us. That we have such a hard time rationalizing it is, I believe, what makes Jesus' gospel so revolutionary.

In this Epiphany season, I hope we can find the courage to lose our lives so that we may truly find them.