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Life Through Death*

DEAR MOTHER IN CHRIST AND OTHER MEMBERS
OF THE BEREAVED FAMILY, AND FRIENDS:

We cannot neatly divide the people here today into "mourners" and "congregation." All of us feel in our hearts the sense of a great loss. We mourn the death of a man who was at once great and warm. Thus it is that most of us are tempted to wish that we did not have to go through the ordeal of this service. For anything that we think or say about Dr. Louis J. Sieck seems simply to deepen this sense of loss.

He was an able and far-seeing administrator of our school. We told him that his tasks were not done and that we were praying hard that he might be restored to us. He was a great leader of his Church, and his grasp of world-wide Lutheranism and Christianity, his friendly reach into many groups, will be so hard to replace. Though he himself was humble about his theology, it will doubtless appear more clearly through the years that he had that clear understanding of God's love in Christ coupled with a courage to stress it which is just what we all needed. He was a devoted husband and father, and how can his place be filled? He was a jovial yet sensitive friend, and his passing leaves so many of us very lonely. Would it not be better if we could simply say our thanks in our heart that God has taken him and ended his sufferings and labors?

In answer to this thought let us together realize that we are here not just out of respect and sympathy, but that God has something to say to us in his illness and death. This is so important, because God's message to us is a message of life. True, every believer's death brings him to a life with Christ that is far better, and in that sense his own better life follows upon his own dying. But there is something more here. St. Paul reflects upon this fact repeatedly, particularly in the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians. *The sickness, pain, and death of a Christian preacher is a preaching of life to those who remain.* Listen to these words:

For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So, then, death worketh in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:11, 12.)

The writer to the Hebrews would say of him that "he, being dead, yet speaketh" (Heb. 11:4). There we have a purpose for this hour which

* Sermon delivered at funeral of President Louis J. Sieck, October 17, 1952, by Prof. R. R. Caemmerer.

our dear father and brother would most heartily approve of, and there we have an answer to our own sense of loss.

I

To understand the remarkable significance of this death, let us first remind ourselves what suffering and dying means to the sufferer himself. God has great plans when He sends weakness to a man and confronts him with death. True, God gives us our bodies and good things to eat and to drink. But always He wants us to remember that we mean something to Him and possess the life of His own Spirit only when as little children, as beggars, we throw ourselves upon His mercy. For we are sinners who have gone our own way again and again. We need His forgiveness, and He has it for us, for Jesus Christ, His Son, suffered and died for us on the Cross. Hence God's great goal for us all is that we cling to that gift of His pardon and His Spirit, that we never let it go. So it is that God sends the maladies of the body, the perplexities of life, the threat of death itself, so that we might put everything that men call strength and power in its proper place and simply count on Him. So St. Paul was led to claim, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Our departed brother was highly endowed with health and a good mind and a winning personality and robust qualities of leadership. Yet our Lord plied him with the little and great infirmities of life. He was not given to complaint, yet God had His reminders in and around him throughout all his life, and particularly as his stature as pastor and president grew, that he was nothing without the grace of God. It was a sort of pious jest with him that when men thought he might withdraw from the tensions of a large pastorate and a metropolitan leadership into the calm of a seminary, suddenly a throng of difficulties beset him—perplexities, persecutions, illness. But this is the point, it was as though he was saying with St. Paul:

We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed (2 Cor. 4:8, 9).

We used to talk about his front—good grooming, erect posture, the ability to shrug off tremendous irritations, the enjoyment of the good things of life as they came. But then we discovered that it wasn't a front, for right in the midst of trial he actually was enjoying the sense of God standing by. The more stress his body had to take—and it was a steady medical problem for many years—the more serene and joyous his experience of the grace of God to him in Jesus Christ.

II

But here we sit, and what does this all say to us? That's just the point, he was talking to us! First and last — literally first and last — Louis J. Sieck was a preacher, a minister of the Gospel, the speaker of a message to people, the message of the grace of God to sinners through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Forty-eight years he was at that business, always talking it, during the last ten years talking it to men who would talk it on. He talked it in big and glowing words of personal address so that people said, "He is really a good preacher." He talked it always and always with the clear essential in the middle of it, that Jesus Christ is Son of God and Redeemer of the world and we have life and forgiveness through Him. Oh, how he glowed with the joy of telling that story! But here is the astounding fact that St. Paul is trying to rub into our minds about his own ministry and certainly about our dear departed father and brother: the very pain and weakness of his body, its death, preached that same message!

We always bear about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that that life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.

And our text repeats it:

For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor. 4:11).

Do you get that word "manifest"? To be a man who publishes for God, who plays on the screen of his life the great drama of God's forgiveness and outpouring of life, that is the business of the Christian preacher. And that publishing, Paul would say, works best when we think of the story and not just of the screen!

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us (2 Cor. 4:7).

It didn't take very long for any of us to discover that this man was holding to a Savior and leaning on the grace of God, not by claiming that he was strong and influential and competent, but by realizing that he was tried and troubled and perplexed — and God had strength for him. But that strength he wanted to share! He wanted to share it with his people, little or great, in his ministry. He had a way of trying to embrace his whole audience, visible and unseen, in his chapel talks and have them sense the pressure of this truth, "When I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:10), "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17).

This was such a powerful ministry of preaching because it was from

Christ and for Christ. The work that was rubbing his veins to pieces was the work of his Lord, he was a partaker of His sufferings and being delivered into death for Jesus' sake. He knew it, and certainly would have it no other way, and made it very clear that it was the business of Jesus and His Word that he was about.

We thought he had more work to do. We were right; he did. His work goes on, and he is still doing it. "So then death worketh in us, but life in you." That God should take him is God's way of saying that this crumbling body is not at all the measure of life, it is an earthen vessel and returns to the dust; but the treasure is the life of God, it goes on, and a better body is to clothe it, and that is a life which we have, too, and which we are to use. What counts is not just the beauty or the manliness or the strength or the riches or the prestige or the success of the body; what counts is that in Christ we have life. He is the Resurrection and the Life, a life that we can have and use, beginning now and ending never.

That life is the very thing we need for continuing the work of this institution. That life is what we need to be a blessing to others even as he was a blessing to us. That life is what you need, who go on in his household and family. That life is working in you through the very show of faith which he has given you right down to these last moments. Don't you remember his own Psalm with which he worshiped with you last Monday:

For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret of His tabernacle shall He hide me; He shall set me up upon a rock. And now shall mine head be lifted up above mine enemies round about me; therefore will I offer in His tabernacle sacrifices of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the Lord. (Ps. 27:5, 6.)

Draw on Christ and His redeeming work for life day by day. There is no other source for it. There would not be if He were still with us. There is no other life, and that is what He would say if He were with us, and that is what God is saying to us through His death. Death has worked in Him, but life is at work in us.