

Called by Unbreakable Love

Stephen Hawking died this week at the age of 76. He lived 53 years longer than his doctors thought likely when he was diagnosed at age 21 with a rare early-onset form of motor neurone disease, also known as ALS. He was, as you know, a world-class physicist with a drive to make cosmic questions and their scientific answers accessible to the world, to everyday people. He was a pop culture icon, a person whose progressive physical losses over time were counterbalanced by his progressive intellectual gains.

Stephen Hawking was in the 99.999th percentile in most aspects of his life. He was extraordinarily smart, had a very rare debilitating disease, and possessed an exceptional personality. But setting his remarkable life next to our more ordinary lives, I think we have more in common than one might guess. His story magnifies the arc of our life stories. If we are lucky, we live through childhood and adolescence, young, middle, and later adulthood, into old age. Many of us count many blessings in those long lives. But as we age, the losses we experience accumulate. We lose family members and friends. Our careers end, and we wonder what purpose is left. We lose physical abilities, although usually not as many as Hawking did. We lose a sense of the future as we are told our time is limited. We lose independence. Approaching the horizon of death, the burden of all our losses and griefs can sometimes feel too heavy to carry.

And then someone else dies, another body part starts to fail, the world becomes less comprehensible and we question our ability to endure, much less thrive.

Life is suffering. Life is hard. ***Where is God calling us when life is painful and our options seem limited at best?***

When we began our “Year of Call” emphases, some might have wondered if there would be anything in it for them. If we equate “call” with “vocation” and “vocation” with “job” or even “career,” then identifying one’s call is largely a task of young adulthood. Or if we identify “call” with “ministry” or “job in the church,” we might think of all those roles which keep a church functioning and say “that’s not me” or “been there, done that.” But this exploration has revealed many more dimensions of God’s call, which reaches out to us across the whole of our lives. “Call” doesn’t necessarily have to do with what we produce or accomplish. And when life is hard, God’s call may simply be to dig in and deepen the roots of our faith. When life is a struggle, all we can do is place our trust in God.

The apostle Paul spoke of the hardships of life with the authority of experience. When he was struck down by the presence of Christ on the road to Damascus, his new calling took him away from a life of privilege (and anger) into a life of suffering—and love. In some of his letters he made generalized references to his trials, but in his second letter to the Corinthians, he named a laundry list of difficulties he had experienced as a follower of Christ. (2 Cor 11:23-29)

- imprisonments, countless floggings, often near death
- 39 lashes 5 times, 3 times beaten with rods, one stoning
- three shipwrecks, adrift at sea for a night and a day
- in danger from rivers, bandits, his own people, Gentiles

- in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, and from false brothers and sisters,
- sleepless nights, hungry and thirsty, cold and naked

And on top of all this, he was always worried about all the churches! Life was not easy for Paul. He confessed his weakness, this man whose birth and education and intelligence might have led to a comfortable life.

Still, he pursued his calling to be an evangelist, to take the gospel to places where it was often met with hostility. Even to Rome, the home of the Emperor, where choosing to call Jesus Christ “Lord” was a direct rejection of the Emperor cult.

The life of Christians in those early centuries, and the life of Christians in many places around the world today, is a life at risk. But in this glorious conclusion of Romans chapter 8, Paul tells us what compels him to press on. In Jesus Christ, he has come to know the force at the heart of the universe. In Jesus Christ, he has learned and experienced the unbreakable, unshakable, all-powerful Love of God.

Stephen Hawking, with characteristic wit, explained what he believed it means to be human. “We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special.” (https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1401.Stephen_Hawking) The apostle Paul gives us a different perspective, a theological one. He might have written, “We are weak, and we live in a broken world in which we sin and suffer and cause pain for others. But we are loved by God. That makes us something very special.”

I suppose that’s why British theologian N.T. Wright says, “The love of God is the deepest truth in the cosmos.” (2002, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 618)

The Love of God for humankind, and for the world we live in, is the ultimate security. It is the reason we are here. It gives us reason to live, purpose in life, the courage and creativity and call to be more than our suffering, more than our losses, more than our grief. The Love of God for us is sufficient for each day and for a lifetime. It is the source of our will to live and to love one another. It is the power which is stronger than all those forces which wage battle against it. The empires of the world will rise and fall; the temptations of the flesh will ultimately prove fleeting; the dangers and fears and intimidating voices of yesterday, today, and tomorrow are nothing compared to the eternal Word of God. Even death is overcome by Love. That is the message of Christ—that an instrument of torture, the cross, has been transformed into a symbol of Love.

Franciscan friar Richard Rohr says it this way: “The cross was Jesus’ voluntary acceptance of undeserved suffering as an act of total solidarity with all the pain of the world. Reflection on this mystery of love can change your whole life.” (2014, *Eager to Love*, Franciscan Media, Cincinnati, p. 21)

Earlier in this season of Lent we heard and reflected on these words from Jesus: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:34-35) This is the message that can change your life, or change your response to your life. We are called to walk through suffering to truth, through pain to joy, through hardship to triumph, all with the assurance of the cross, that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. No thing. NOTHING.

So—we are back to the question of where is God calling us when our life is painful and our options seem limited? Can there be a vocation, a calling for the frailest of the eldest, the neediest among us?

None of us wants to be in that position, but in our weakness God's Love is strong. The gift the needy bring to a community is to evoke the care of others, who thus learn and practice the way of Love. The poor among us have a vocation to draw out the compassion and generosity of the rich. The weak elicit the support of the strong. And those who are very young and very old are the reason those in the middle learn that to lose their life, for the sake of others, is to find it. (Ah, yes, it's not all about me!) To be old and frail is to have a calling to receive the care of others. And when death approaches, "we are called to let go of the things that bind us to this life." Writer Joyce Ann Mercer describes it this way: "Dying to this life, we hear God calling us out of the responsibilities, burdens, and sufferings of this life, and into fullness in the divine life of the resurrection." (2017, in *Calling All Years Good*, Kathleen Cahalan and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, eds., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 196)

And in doing so, we give witness to the Love of God in Jesus Christ. For aging and death are not the worst things which can happen to us. Far worse is to live a meaningless life, a life with little goodness and not a lot of love.

But oh, my friends, we are here this morning because somehow, somewhere we have heard the call of Christ, the call of Love. It may be a distant echo, or it may be a resounding symphony which rings in our whole beings, but something, somehow, somewhere has called us to this place to hear again the good news of God's Love in Jesus Christ. Paul shares it with us—

no trouble, no hard times, no hatred,

no hunger, no homelessness, no bullying,

no backstabbing, no losses, no griefs,

no struggles, no pains, no enemies,

no addictions, no shame, no sorrows,

no injustice, no racism, no NOTHING can shake the love of God in Jesus Christ!

This is the deepest truth in the cosmos, the power at the heart of everything. God is calling us in LOVE, throughout our lives and into eternal life.

Will you answer? Will you respond with your love?