

Among the notorious criminals in history who did time on death row we find the name of St. Paul. Writing from prison to the Philippians in a famous passage we'll hear next Sunday, he says he really doesn't know if he's gonna live or die. He would prefer to die so he could be with Christ, but if God wanted him to live, so be it. Either way it was fine with him. It's a very courageous statement. He says a similar thing in today's reading from Romans. We've been hearing parts of the letter to the Romans all summer long and today's is the last of that series. In today's passage he assumes we feel the same way about life and death. "We do not live to ourselves," Paul says, "we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's."

Nice of Paul to speak on my behalf. I wish I felt that brave. But I know if I get the choice I'll keep on living awhile, thank you very much.

Although death is as certain as the Bush and Gore candidacies, we still like to live as if it's never going to happen. The last few months of life are usually the most expensive because many families want the assurance that they tried everything to save the life. Other people have a living will allowing death to take its natural course. A friend of mine told me this week about her mother's death at age 91. All the daughters knew their mother had signed a living will to avoid unnecessary procedures, and during her final illness one of the doctors tried to convince the family they should authorize otherwise. When the daughters adamantly said, "No," this doctor exclaimed, "Living wills just get in the way of treatment." They replied, "Well, yes, that's the idea." Their mother had helped them accept the reality of death.

Normally we try to cover it up. When someone dies we make them up to look asleep. At the cemetery we disguise that large hole in the ground by skirting a ruffle around the casket. We cover the mound of dirt with a green tarp so it looks more like a park than a hole. After our final prayers we usually walk away before the casket is lowered. We have a hard time looking death in the face, even though death looks back at us every day.

Catholic funerals strengthen our hope at death. It wasn't always this way. The requiem mass used to include black vestments and the *Dies irae*, a hymn about God's wrath. It was a dreary affair, looking back. Now the funeral liturgy better proclaims our hope for life after death. We use images from baptism: holy water, the easter candle, and the white pall. The promise of our baptism will be fulfilled when we reach eternal life. For similar reasons the church encourages mourners to remain present at the cemetery for lowering the casket. We stand above the grave with faith more powerful than this tomb. I often have a hard time convincing families and funeral directors that remaining for the interment would affirm our faith. Most of us are afraid to get that close to death.

So I have to hand it to St. Paul when he says death or life, we are the Lord's. It really doesn't matter either way. He makes these comments, incidentally, after trying to put to rest some squabbles in the Roman community. Some people were vegetarians; others were not. Some fasted on certain days of the week; others did not. The Romans

wanted Paul to settle these issues. He says, basically, "Look, there are bigger issues than these. You can eat or you can fast -- all that matters is that you do it for the Lord." Sometimes we withhold forgiveness from people because we can't let go of very small problems. If we had Paul's attitude about life and death, if we really believed the promise of Jesus, if we pondered that promise every day, if we let the gospel message of joy wash over us -- if we could do all that we would fight less about food, about groups, and about authority. We'd be less anxious for somebody to settle an issue and more anxious for the reign of God.