

SERMON TITLE: "Donation of Life"
SERMON TEXT: Ezekiel 37:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 26, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday, when I illustrated my sermon by telling you about one of the TV shows I like to watch, Chris Hicks plugged her ears and tried not to listen to what I said. It wasn't that our Lay Leader was refusing to hear her pastor's message. It was just that she hadn't seen that episode yet and didn't want her good TV program to be spoiled. Well, maybe some of you will need to plug your ears today too because I'm starting this sermon with a recap from the TV show *Chicago Med*.

In the first episode of the new season, a couple came into the ER after being in an auto accident. The husband was dying, and the doctors had to ask his wife if she would give permission to donate his heart to another patient there in the hospital. It was an awkward moment because she was suffering from her own injuries, emotionally distraught about the argument they had been having just before the accident, and now faced with the fact that her husband wouldn't survive. Having to make an organ donation decision in that moment had to have been hard. But her husband's driver's license didn't indicate that he was a donor, and the doctors were persuaded of the need and potential to save a life, and so the wife agreed. The heart wasn't the right size and had to be re-shaped. But, the surgery appeared to be a success, and the wife was able to see and feel that she had made a good decision.

Today I want to talk with you about organ donation. It isn't a very normal topic for sermons. But every year, the United Methodist calendar designates the second Sunday in November as "Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday." Usually we're too busy honoring veterans on that day to make any mention. And then it's Thanksgiving and Advent, and the whole topic gets by-passed. But this year, we have this extra Sunday between Thanksgiving and the first Sunday of Advent. So I thought, why not? Why not talk about the donation of life?

1—BIBLICAL EMPHASIS ON GIVING LIFE

Of course, we know that there's nothing in the Bible about organ donation. Thousands of years ago, when the Bible was being written, there was no possibility of surgically removing an eye or a kidney from one person and reconnecting it successfully in another person. There's no record that any of the biblical writers entertained such a notion, even in their wildest dreams. But the Prophet Ezekiel did have a pretty wild and profound vision of body parts coming back to life. So, it seems to me that his vision of the valley of dry bones is a good place to begin.

Before we jump to the raising of dead parts, though, let's acknowledge that Ezekiel's vision was a metaphor for something else. The prophet Ezekiel was actually writing about the Babylonian exile. In 587 BCE, the Babylonian army conquered Jerusalem, killing many Jews in battle, and taking thousands of others into captivity. Those taken away were the educated and wealthy cream of the crop. This was done in part to bring such talent into Babylon and, also, to create a brain drain and leadership deficit in Judea. Ezekiel the priest was one of those elite citizens taken to Babylon and now subjugated like slaves. Ezekiel and his peers weren't used to such suffering and abuse. Thus, tragedy and grief were their predominant experiences. Even though they had survived the conquest, it felt like life had come to an end and death had set in. Away from their home, their country, their holy city and temple, it felt like they were a hopeless, lifeless valley of dry bones.

So, the good news message that God gave Ezekiel to speak to his people was that those dry, dead bones could come back to life. God could open up the graves and stir those bones to move and rattle again. They could be covered with sinews, flesh, and skin. God could then breathe life back into them, so that a vast multitude could stand again on their feet and once again live on their own soil.

Of course, Ezekiel wasn't saying that those very same Jews who went into exile would be the ones who would rise up and return to Jerusalem. The time elapse between captivity and return was more than a normal lifetime. Nor was Ezekiel talking about a bodily resurrection to heaven. That theological belief

didn't even exist among the Hebrews until a few hundred years later. No, at the time of Ezekiel's prophecy, he was indicating God's plan to restore exiles to Jerusalem at a later date, with a new generation. Those who had come out of Jerusalem would be comforted in knowing that their children or grandchildren would be able to return to their homeland. And, in order for that to be successful, there would necessarily be a passing of the baton—a relay of information, wisdom, beliefs, and traditions from one generation to the next. In other words, there would necessarily be a donation of life.

2—DONATION OF LIFE TODAY

So, that leads us to today and our topic of organ donation. Whether from a violent injury, an accident, a long-term disease, or a gradual decline, all of us are going to die someday. But that sad physical reality doesn't have to weigh on us like an emotional and spiritual death too. We can rejoice in the good news that God is able to restore dry, dead bones to life.

Most often, we talk and think about *organ* donation, maybe because that's what's most dramatic. When we donate our kidneys, heart, lungs, and liver, we're able to save up to eight lives.¹ But, at the time of death, we're able to do even more than that. "Human tissue donation includes skin, bone, veins, heart valves, and connective tissue such as ligaments, tendons, and cartilage."² Such bone and tissue donation from one person is able to heal up to 75.¹ And, if we donate our corneas, we're able to restore sight to two people.¹

Some of us may not have signed up yet to be organ and tissue donors because we have some questions or concerns. So let me address some of those worries.

Since we're religious people, let's start with spiritual concerns. As your theologically-trained pastor, let me assure you that there's no spiritual prohibition on donating any parts or even your whole body. In fact, such a gracious gift is viewed as a positive spiritual act. Our United Methodist *Book of Discipline* says this: "We believe that organ transplantation and organ donation are acts of charity, *agape* love, and self-sacrifice. We recognize the life-giving benefits of organ and other tissue donation and

encourage all people of faith to become organ and tissue donors as a part of their love and ministry to others in need.”³ In fact, “all major religions—Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, [Mormonism,] Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—fully support donation” and “have taken the theological position that donation from one’s body will not [negatively] affect you in the afterlife or next life.”²

So, organ and tissue donation don’t create spiritual problems. How about practical problems? No trouble there either. “There is no cost to be an organ and tissue donor. All costs associated with the donation process are assumed by the recovery organizations.”² In fact, donating one’s whole body can sometimes even reduce your funeral costs. While at my last church in Colorado, I helped a young lady from my congregation get in touch with a company that agreed to pick up her mother’s body in Texas, remove the parts that would be useful, then cremate the remains, and ship those cremains (ashes) to the daughter, all free of charge. Tiffany never could have afforded to care for her mother in any other way. That was such a blessing.

For those who don’t want cremation for yourself or your loved one, donation is done so as not to disfigure the body. Because the retrieval process happens quickly, funerals aren’t delayed, and open casket services are still possible.²

Some folks might not sign up to be a donor because they think it might cause more emotional distress for their families at the time of death. But “studies show that donation most often provides immediate and long-term consolation. Donation can be especially comforting when the death is unexpected and the donor is young. Family members of the donor often feel encouraged that something good has come from something tragic.”²

What about those of us who are older and sicker? Is there any use for our worn-out parts? Well, there may be some parts of our bodies that won’t be usable, but “you should not rule yourself out for any reason.” “Medical criteria for organ, tissue, and eye donation change on a regular basis and are

determined by need . . . [so] donation professionals will review your potential to determine the suitability of organs and tissues for transplant.”²

Maybe your hindrance to donation is something else. Maybe you don’t think there’s any need. Or maybe you think someone else is going to take care of the problem. Well, let me share some statistics with you. More than 116,000 Americans are currently waiting for an organ transplant.⁴ “Even the largest football stadium in the US could not fit the number of patients on the national transplant waiting list,”² and “on average, 20 people die per day in the United States due to not receiving the organ they needed.”⁴

So, now, if you’re convinced that the donation of life is a good thing to do, your next question might be, “How?” Well, one way is to sign up at the Department of Motor Vehicles when you renew your driver’s license. Another, quicker way, is by registering through the website www.yesutah.org. And, when you sign up, be sure to have a conversation with your family, so they will know your wishes. That will make the follow-through easier for them and more certain for you when your death comes.

CONCLUSION

On Thanksgiving evening, I saw a TV news story about a little girl named Elsie who had died just before Thanksgiving last year. Her family decided to turn tragedy into hope by donating her organs. The little girl’s donation was able to save five other lives and ease the pain of her grieving parents. Today, Elsie’s story is featured on an I-15 billboard in Lehi, encouraging others to become donors too.

Why wouldn’t we do this? Once we’re dead, we don’t need our organs anymore. As we enter this season of giving, let’s consider a gift that really does keep on giving. Let’s give the donation of life.

¹ <https://www.donatelife.net/statistics/>

² https://bcw.edu/bcw/Organ-Tissue-Marrow/About-Organ-and-Tissue-Donation/index.htm?tb=2&gclid=CjwKCAiAo9_QBRACEiwASknDwQRjCD2B4UXpUU3vxCc4skwQm9S-5FQpnoEuAXmVLV5HinUbn6FgOxoCSI8QAvD_BwE

³2016, Social Principles, Para. 162.W.

⁴<https://www.dmv.org/ut-utah/organ-donor.php>