

My New Testament professor in seminary was a brilliant scholar, a devoted teacher, and someone who had a reputation for getting things finished right at the last minute. She had on her refrigerator a cartoon from *The New Yorker*. It showed a man sitting at a desk stacked with lots of papers, saying brightly to the hooded figure of the grim reaper, "Thank goodness you're here! I can't seem to get anything done without a deadline!" It was a clever cartoon, and I could see why she liked it.

Since my own seminary experience was shaped by my cancer diagnosis, it was to me more than just a clever cartoon. That year I often felt as if the grim reaper were following me around as I attended classes and oncologist appointments, as I ate breakfast in the refectory and prayed in the chapel and chatted with friends. He was someone who never spoke, never touched me, never got in my way, but was simply always there. My mortality. Now that it is six years later and I feel healthy, the grim reaper gives me more space, more elbow room. But he never vanishes entirely, and I expect he never will. I have been given more time before I face that deadline, so aptly named: deadline.

I pray with gratitude in the words of the prayer book "we thank you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life" and "Lord, you have brought us in safety to this new day." And I also pray in the words of the prayer book, "that we may end our lives in faith and hope, without suffering and without reproach."

If I were inclined to argue with Pat Robertson, and his saying the devastation in Haiti is the result of a pact with the devil, I would tell him to read his Bible, especially the verses in today's gospel. There were Pat Robertson types in Jesus' day, too, the folks who figured that if a tragedy happened, it must be because someone had sinned. "There were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus tells them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as

they did." The same can be said of those who have died in Haiti and Chile: do you think they were worse sinners than everyone else? No, we all sin.

When a woman who has been raped brings the rapist to trial, she often feels better if there are women on the jury. It seems helpful to have someone who can understand on a personal level the sense of vulnerability and violation she has suffered, someone who can empathize with her in an immediate way, as another woman. But the experts say that in reality, it is women who are most likely to turn against the victim, to blame the victim for the assault against her. The people who have studied this tendency have found that women are most likely to resist empathizing with the victim. The reason is that it gives these women the illusion of security to think, subconsciously, that if they don't do whatever the victim did, whether that's wearing the kind of clothes she wore or taking too long to find her keys, that they will always be safe from rape. And so they blame the victim.

And so if we can blame someone's death on some sin that person has committed, it gives us a false sense of security that if we are different from that person, that we will be safe from their fate. It is the kind of attitude that Job's friends take toward his suffering. But the Bible tells us that Job's friends are wrong, just as Jesus tells us that those who blame these disasters on the victims' sins are wrong.

Have you noticed that every time someone tells Jesus, "That person's sins are worse than mine" Jesus says they're wrong. We would do well to keep that in mind the next time we're tempted to judge someone else's sins as worse than our own.

In reality, there is only one difference between us and the people who were killed in the fall of the tower of Siloam; there is only one difference between us and the people who were killed in the natural disasters of the 21st century. The one difference is that we get another chance. Whether or not we deserve it, we get another chance. We are alive. We get to see the sun come up another day. We get another chance to love God and love our neighbor.

How many opportunities to love God and love our neighbor have we wasted or frittered away? How many times have we missed an opportunity to pray? How many times have we missed an opportunity to say something loving to a fellow human being?

Jesus gives us only two commandments: love God and love your neighbor. It couldn't be much simpler than that. And yet how often we fall short.

“Repent” sounds like such a heavy theological word. It simply means, “turn around.” “Repent” simply means, “Make a U-turn.” If there have been times when you've wandered away from loving God, you get to turn around and head back toward loving God. If there have been times when you've wandered away from loving your neighbors, you get to turn around and head back toward loving your neighbors. And if you could use a little help along the way, well, that's why God invented the Church.

People often say that when you realize how short life is, you realize how important it is to get as much as you can out of life. But it seems to me that the things we can get out of life are fleeting by their very nature. Every experience vanishes the moment you experience it. Our life is, as Prospero says, “melted into air, into thin air, and, like...the cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself...shall dissolve” (IV. i. 150-154).

The only thing that lasts beyond death is God.

The only way to keep our lives beyond death, is to give them to the One who endures beyond death. When you realize how short life is, the real lesson is how important it is to give as much as you can out of life. How important it is to give as much love as you can out of life.

Repentance is a second chance at love. God has granted you the great blessing of bringing you in safety to this new day, this new chance, this new opportunity, this new life. You have the opportunity to love God more deeply, and to enjoy God's love for you. You have the opportunity to love the people around you, and to enjoy their love for you.

We can thank goodness the grim reaper is there to remind us that we have a deadline; since we each have a certain amount of time, it's up to us to fill it with all the love we can. We have been given life, the chance to repent, to turn around, to love God and our neighbors. Thank goodness. Thank God.