

Face death with grace and watchfulness, ethicist urges

April 28, 2007

Updated: 4/27/07

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By Marv Knox

Editor

ABILENE—Christians must not abandon people who are dying on the doorstep of medicine, ethicist Allen Verhey pleaded.

Instead, the church should engage in “watchfulness” with the seriously ill and dying, Verhey stressed in the Maston Christian Ethics Lectures at Hardin-Simmons University’s Logsdon Seminary in Abilene.

Ethicist Allen Verhey urges churches to treat the seriously ill and dying with grace and to practice “watchfulness.” He delivered the Maston Christian Ethics Lectures at Hardin-Simmons University’s Logsdon Seminary. (Photo by Dave Coffield/HSU)

To treat the dying with the grace they should receive, Christians must reverse common practice and also bridge chasms between sick people, medicine and faith, said Verhey, professor of Christian ethics at Duke University’s divinity school in Durham, N.C.

“In our culture, dying has become a medical matter, and care for the dying has been assigned to those who are skilled in medicine,” acknowledged Verhey, who has spent more than three decades studying bioethics.

“Modern medicine, moreover, seems thoroughly and deliberately ‘religionless.’ ... The practices of piety—and indeed ‘God’—seem to have been pushed to the margins of medical care, retreating more and more as the knowledge and power of medicine advance more and more.”

But those practices, particularly Scripture reading and prayer, should move back to the center of care for the terminally ill, he urged.

Reading Scripture with the ill and dying is important, because Scripture helps Christians remember their past and their context, Verhey said. Scripture is “the story that gives a Christian identity and Christian folk a community.”

Scripture aids and comforts in part because it “acknowledges our mortality” and “our lives evidently end in death,” he said.

“Death makes its power felt in serious or chronic illness and in severe pain, when the body is experienced not only as ‘us,’ but also as ‘the enemy,’” he said. “It makes its power felt in the weakness that robs the sick of the capacity to exercise control of themselves and of their world.”

And although medicine’s resistance to death sometimes is heroic, death inevitably “makes its power felt in a hospital,” Verhey observed.

“Death makes its power felt when the sick or dying are removed and separated from those with whom they share a common life. It makes its power felt when their environment is inhospitable to family and friends. ...

“It makes its power felt when the fear of being abandoned is not met by the presence of others who care. And the silence of death makes its power felt in lonely dumbness, when community and communication have failed.”

This power “can push people to the margins of life,” he said. People who are “well” often feel vulnerable and uncomfortable in front of sickness, so they relegate the ill to hospitals, where they are out of sight—and thought.

But since Christians believe physical death is not final, they should face death and tend to the dying with watchfulness, Verhey urged.

Watchfulness is a biblical concept, he said, noting it is “heroic discipleship”

in the Gospel of Mark, “patient endurance” in the Revelation, a “call to care for those who are pressed down and crushed by hurt and harm” in the Gospel of Matthew, and an invitation “to rejoice—and to grieve—in hope” in the writings of the Apostle Paul.

“If life and its flourishing are not the greatest goods, neither are death and suffering the ultimate evils,” he insisted, explaining how Christian watchfulness produces twin virtues—courage and patience.

“Death and suffering and the threats of death are not as strong as the promise of God. One need not use all of one’s resources against them. One need only act with integrity in the face of them.”

Terminally ill Christian patients can be compared to martyrs, who bore witness to their faith, even as they faced death, he added.

“Many Christian patients still display the same comfort and the same courage,” he said. “They still bear witness to their hope by their readiness to die but not to kill. They display their comfort and their courage by refusing both offers of assisted suicide and offers of treatment that may prolong their days but only render those days—or months or years—less apt for their tasks of reconciliation with enemies or fellowship with friends or just plain fun with the family.

“Heroic discipleship and its courage liberate patients from the tyrannies of survival or ease.”

Watchfulness forms patience and courage in Christians, Verhey said.

“It forms in Christian community a readiness both to ‘rejoice in hope’ (Romans 12:12) and to mourn, to grieve in hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Watchfulness, like Jesus, still blesses ‘those who mourn,’ blesses those aching visionaries who long for God’s future and who weep because it is not yet, still sadly, not yet.”

Watchfulness follows the lead of the Christians commended by Jesus in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Verhey said. These people received Christ's praise because they fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, visited prisoners and took care of the sick.

"That parable is eloquent testimony that watchfulness takes the shape of care," he noted. "And it is an elegant reminder to caregivers that the presence of God is mediated to them through their patients, (and) the sick—in their very weakness and vulnerability, in their hurt and loneliness—represent Christ to the caregiver."

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