END OF LIFE DECISIONS IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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OUTLINE FOR TODAY

- Some Basic Starting Points
- Christian Views of Death
- The Sacredness of Life
- Some Distinctions and Principles
- Jesus as Model
- Summary
- Questions and Comments

OPENING REFLECTION

- “I’m not afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

--Woody Allen

STARTING POINTS

- We will die, and at uncertain times
- We may fear both death and the process of dying
- Dying today is uniquely medicalized
- Death as “unimaginable” and “unknown”

CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF DEATH

- The interpretation of Genesis 3
- Death as a positive release
- Death as the enemy
- Death and resurrection

DEATH IN LIFE, LIFE IN DEATH

Caravaggio, “Raising of Lazarus”

Dali, “Lazarus, Come Forth”

WHAT DOES “LIFE IS SACRED” MEAN?

- Life has infinite and absolute value
- Life is a gift from God
- Life is given to us to protect as stewards

OUR LIFE IS NOT OUR OWN

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” --I Corinthians 6:19-20

SOME DISTINCTIONS

- Decisions about my life or someone else's life
- Killing or letting die
- Killing intentionally or as an unintended consequence
- Withholding or withdrawing treatment

JESUS AS MODEL FOR HOW TO DIE

Reasons to be cautious about this model:

- I am not Jesus
- Jesus dies in the prime of his life
- Jesus dies a death of horrible humiliating torture

JESUS AS MODEL FOR HOW TO DIE

What we might learn from the model:

- Courage to risk death and willingness to sacrifice the self
- Faithfulness to the God who gives and redeems life
- Honesty about pain and despair
- Humility that we don’t have complete control

PATIENCE, ACCEPTANCE, HOPE

"This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, "A Morning Prayer in Time of Sickness" (p. 461)

DEATH AS CONSISTENT WITH LIFE

- Jesus' passion and Jesus' life
- If we are fortunate, does the way we die confirm the way we lived?

WHAT ARE WE LEFT WITH?

- Religious beliefs are unlikely to provide clear answers
- Christian ethics insists on a strong “bias” for life
- Christianity provides a narrative enabling both lament and hope
- Death seen within the context of the hope of eventual “bodily resurrection”

FINAL REFLECTION

- “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”

--Ecclesiastes 9:10

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

KEY PRINCIPLES TO CONSIDER

- Compassion/care for the weak and helpless
- Autonomy
- Social justice—equality and distribution of resources