

Becoming the Living Dead

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Date: 13 October 2024

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[0 : 0 0] All right, good morning everybody. My name is Anthony Parrott. I get to serve as one of the co-lead pastors here at the Table Church. And we're starting a new series this week. It'll be going from now until the month of November. Pastor Tanetta is the one who sort of arranges our series, our sermon topics, our preaching team. And as she was planning, she was thinking like, hey man, the Table Church used to have this sort of reputation of doing things that were more like fun and a little offbeat and humorous. And so she wanted to create a fun sermon series.

And so her idea was like horror movie monsters. That was her idea of fun. Now Tanetta's not here this weekend. Her and her wife, Bukola, they're down in Atlanta celebrating Atlanta Pride. And then the Q Christian Conference is happening in Atlanta this January. So they're doing some preparation work for that. So I want to pray for them, keep them in mind. And actually, I want to stop and just take a moment to pray as we turn our attention to God's Word. So would you, if you're comfortable, and you can bow your head, close your eyes. Sometimes I look up towards a light. Just find a posture that works for you as we pray.

Holy Spirit of God, we believe that you are in this place, that you are moving in our midst, that you are among us, you are with us, that you are a God who does not abandon us.

Spirit of the living God, we thank you that you are with us, you are for us, you are not against us, that your love for us will not fail, that your love for us is what some might call reckless.

That you would leave behind a whole flock to chase down the one lost sheep. Thank you, God, that you chased me. And I know you've chased so many in this room.

[1 : 5 7] God, I want to lift up some of the needs in our community, in our congregation. God, we remember Jules and the death of her grandma this weekend. We pray that you would comfort their family, bring them hope and peace as they remember and celebrate her life.

We lift up Tanera and Bukola as they do some of that preparatory work for Q Christian and for an organization that preaches the gospel, the good news, that God's love includes every single person.

God, we remember the now more than a year of violence and war in Israel and Gaza and Palestine. God, we pray for a ceasefire. We pray for the end of the flow of weapons paid for by our tax dollars.

God, we lift up those who are sick and hurting in our congregation and our community. Those who have been disabled by diseases that seem sort of mysterious and hard to understand.

Those who have been kept at home, those who have been battling depression and really hard life transitions, God.

[3 : 1 0] We pray that your mercy and your peace would be made clear and abundant to them. God, now as we turn our attention to your word, to the scriptures, we pray that you would illuminate them for us.

That words that can sometimes sort of bounce off of our brains, that this morning that you would make them clear. And that you would use even me, God, to say something worth saying this morning.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. So we're turning our attention to this new series called Shadow Boxing, Confronting the Monsters We Most Fear.

And the idea is that we're going to take a look at some of those monster tropes and take a look at what fears they might represent within us and how the gospel, the good news, the story of Jesus, confronts those fears and moves us forward.

Now, how many here like horror movies, creepy movies, things like that? There's a few of you. You all are the like minority, but you're a very loud minority. You like show up at the box office.

[4 : 17] You show up on Netflix and you are streaming those films. Now, I don't like horror monster creepy. It's not my bag. I think, okay, we're going to get a little creepy.

So my biological mom, she had some mental illness. She tried to wake up my dead grandma with me standing there. That was all the horror I ever needed in my life. That was it. That was all I needed as a seven-year-old, okay?

But we're going to talk about zombies today. We're going to talk about the undead and what some of those fears are that why we sort of are afraid of zombies and how we might confront those fears.

Now, sort of crowd response. I'll try to repeat this for the live stream too. Why do you think we don't like zombies? Why might we be afraid of zombies? They eat us.

Yeah, the cannibalism, real turnoff, right? Their physical appearance. The physical appearance. That's right. They're gory. They're rotting. What else? Lack of free will.

[5 : 16] Yes, okay. Now we're going down like a layer deeper. A lack of free will, right? They seem like they don't have their own desires or they just have a collective desire.

What else? Someone you love. Someone you love. That's right. You can watch somebody that you knew who was alive and now they are just monstrous and they don't have their free will and they're gory and all of that.

Yeah, zombies sort of speak to this fear of, you know, being zombified, of losing our autonomy and of becoming something monstrous that we never thought that we could be.

That something could take over our bodies and our wills and then just do nothing but work to join more to that collective monstrosity. So, to approach this, I'm going to invite us to turn to our Bibles.

To the Gospel of John chapter 12. Gospel of John chapter 12. And I am, I'm the difficult one of our two main preachers and I don't put the words on the screen.

[6 : 24] So, I invite you to open up your Bible if you have a physical one or an app if you have your phone. Actually, if you can go to the next slide. Some apps I recommend. Now, as a Bible nerd, I will say there are no good Bible apps.

It's just, just the life that I have been forced to live as a Bible nerd. But here are some okay ones. Biblegateway.com is a website and an app. It's got all of the translations that you could possibly want.

The Bible app on both app stores is fine. It's okay. If you like search for something, the search results come up in a completely random order that like I will spend too many minutes trying to figure out why they put them in that order.

There's also an app called Our Bible that is made by specifically like progressive or liberal Christians. It's got a bunch of devotionals and reading plans on there.

So, if you're looking for something that's got like, how do I understand a passage? The Our Bible app I actually do recommend. It's like a iffy sort of app technically wise, but the content is pretty solid. All right.

[7 : 22] So, we're in the Gospel of John chapter 12. We're looking at verses 23 through 26. And we're getting towards the end of Jesus's life in John's retelling of the life and death of Jesus.

And so, Jesus is answering a question about, you know, people wanting to see him. And Jesus says this. Jesus replies, The time has come for the human one, that's the son of man, you might be used to that translation.

The time has come for the human one, the son of man, to be glorified. I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever.

Whoever serves me, I'm going to stop here. Whoever serves me must follow me. This is the Gospel of John chapter 12. Now, I'm going to go back through it and just highlight a couple things before I get into my main points for today.

[8 : 33] So, Jesus says, The time has come for the human one, the son of man, to be glorified. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus is talking about glory, glory equals death. Okay?

Glory equals death. In the sort of modern conception of the world, and even the ancient conception of the word glory, glory is about being sort of lifted up, elevated, given honor, given a position of authority.

But the Gospel of John turned the concept of glory on its head, and for Jesus, glory equals death. When, is it, John and Andrew, their mom says, Hey, Jesus, will you, when you come into your kingdom, will, can they sit on either side of your throne?

And Jesus replies, he says, well, it's actually not for me to decide, but when the son of man lifted up is glorified, there will be two on my side. And Jesus is not talking about being put on a throne, he's talking about being put on a cross, and the two criminals who are side by side of him.

Okay? So, Jesus says, the time has come for the human one to be glorified. To be glorified is to die. And then the way that we can kind of know this is, we keep reading, I assure you, that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain.

[9 : 46] But if it dies, it bears much fruit. And the point of grain, the point of seed from any sort of fruit is multiplication. The whole point of why a seed exists is so it can fall to the ground, be buried, and then rise up into new life and bear even more seeds and more fruit.

And you can kind of imagine like a children's story about a seed that doesn't want to be buried, but then having to learn that like, no, it's in the burial, it's in the death, that life actually begins.

Verse 25, those who love their lives will lose them, and those who love their lives will lose them. Those who hate their lives in this world, and that phrase is important, will keep them forever.

And we're going to sort of focus our attention on these two phrases here. Those who love their life lose it. And then those who hate their life, and we have to pay attention to this whole phrase, life in this world, they are the ones who will keep it for eternal life, for the life of the age to come.

Now, John, in particular, uses the word world. I had to practice that phrase in the mirror. The word world in a couple different ways. Because you have a verse like John 3.16.

[11 : 05] And so you can see that love of the world can be a good thing.

God has love for the world, gives God's self for the world to save the world. John, the next verse, John 3.17. God did not send his son to condemn the world, but to save it, to rescue it.

So you can see that world is not inherently bad. It is, in fact, the whole mission of God to rescue the world from the powers of evil and death. And you can also see phrases, both in the Gospel of John and then later in the letters of John, 1st 2nd 3rd John, where world is also used in this sort of pejorative sense of anyone who loves the world, the love of God is not in them.

And it's sort of like, WTF, God? You love the world. That seemed to be fine. Am I not to love the world? How is that okay? Now, an author can use a word in different ways. And so there is the one way that God uses, that the scriptures use the word world to refer to like the people, creation, cosmos.

That thing in Genesis 1 that God calls very good. But flesh and blood and bone and dirt and soil and tree and sun and water, all of that, God calls it good.

[12 : 27] And God is coming to rescue it, to save it. It's what we talked about in the book of Romans, where all of creation is groaning for its redemption to be reborn into new creation, a creation without curse, without pain.

So that's one way that the writer of the Gospel of John, the letters of John, uses the word world, in a positive sense, the thing that God loves. And then the other way that the author uses the word world is the idea of the systems of the world that bring harm and death and oppression.

What one translator, a guy by the name of Walter Wink, just calls the systems of domination. And so yes, John 3.16, God loves the world. And yes, we should not be lovers of systems of domination.

And we have to pay attention as readers of Scripture to know which one is being talked about. Because to hate the world in the sense of hating the created order is not good and is not what God wants.

We are meant to love the created order and to hate systems of domination. So, Jesus says, those who love their lives will lose them. And those who hate their lives in this world, hate their lives in these systems of domination, they are the ones who get the life of the age, the life of the age to come, eternal life.

[13 : 49] So that gives us some direction of where we're going of what does it mean to love our life and lose it? And what does it mean to hate our lives and the systems of domination and then to gain life of the age?

So let's talk about, we're going to talk about three main things. This is like a classic three-point sermon. Our first point is we're going to talk about zombification, becoming the undead.

How do we get zombified? How do we become the undead? And there are a few ways that this happens. The first one is the idea of the loss of identity. The loss of identity.

We become zombified in this life, no, not real life zombies, but zombified in our lives when we lose our identity. And there are so many pressures in the systems of the world, the systems of domination, who want us to lose our identity.

So many systems that are pushing us to fit in, that are pushing us to keep perhaps part of ourselves in the closet, that are pushing us to not stand out.

[14 : 56] There are so many ways that our culture wants us to, you know, not be caught if you're divergent in any sort of way. Now, in sort of psychological terms, this could be called enmeshment.

So in sort of family systems, you have all sorts of individuals that have relationships and connectivity, if it's family, if it's friends, if it's workplace. And one way that we can move towards unhealth is that when we become enmeshed with the other people in our family or a friend or a corporate system where, oh, you feel sad?

Well, not only do I recognize that you feel sad, but I have to become sad too. Oh, you really love horror movies? I hate them, but I can't tell you that, so I'm going to pretend to love horror movies.

Oh, you really need to, you know, make yourself fanboyant and flashy. And even though that makes me uncomfortable, I'm going to do that as well.

Oh, you really avoid conflict? Well, then I'm going to have to avoid conflict. Oh, you really hide every piece of yourself? I really have to hide every piece of myself. That's enmeshment. And that's how we lose our identity.

[16 : 08] The second way that we can become zombified, that we can become the undead, is a loss of culture. What becomes known as assimilation. And this happens in many different ways where the melting pot of America, can be a place of beauty where lots of different cultures can be together, but it can also be a place of domination where your culture is no longer allowed to exist.

And it has to become flattened out into sort of a beige in order to be allowed. A third way that we can be zombified is a loss of autonomy or subjugation.

And this can happen in authoritarian environments. This can happen in spiritual environments. Churches that are all about hierarchy and who's in charge and making sure that you don't have a sense of identity or a sense of culture or a sense of self, but you must be subjugated to listen and to obey and where a relationship is dependent on your obedience.

This is what can happen in abuse and abusive relationships and unhealthy relationships. Now, these all happen.

A loss of identity, loss of culture, loss of autonomy. And we can become protective against those and also reactive against those.

[17 : 32] Because when we're wounded, when we're hurt, when we lose part of ourselves, then if there is anything left, then our instinct is to push back against that.

Now, there are small ways that this can happen. Small, silly ways. Like when the worship leader says, everybody raise your hand. And there is some percentage of people in this room who's like, well, I was going to raise my hand, but now that you asked me to, I'm not going to.

Right? Somebody give me an amen. Amen. And, you know, I was going to say amen, but not anymore. Okay? So there's going to be those small ways of rebellion. No, I'm not going to lose my autonomy.

I will not do those things that you asked me to, just because you asked me to. And so we have to pay attention to the ways that we've been hurt, the ways that we've been wounded, the ways that we have been victims of a loss of identity or culture or autonomy.

And pay attention to the ways that those are then moving us not towards enmeshment, but towards distancing or hyper individualism, where we are just on our own.

[18 : 38] So let's talk about a few of those ways. So Jesus says, those who love their lives will lose them. Those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever. So how do we become like a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies?

How do we follow Jesus in this example? So let's talk about death as a form of rebirth, what it means to be truly dead. Dead in the sense that Jesus is calling us towards, death that leads to life.

So the first way that I see this is dying to individualism. Our culture loves individuality. So there is losing our sense of self, and then there is also only being self, elevating the individual above all else.

It's what consumerism and commercialism feeds itself on, the whole idea of treat yourself, right? And this hyper individualism, that moves me away from enmeshment towards estrangement, that I am so individual, I am so alone, I am so focused on self, that I'm lonely, I'm by myself, I'm on my own.

And consumerism will eat us up, because we aren't paying attention to what's happening to everyone else around us. We're so in our bubbles of individuality, that everyone else's pain bounces off, until eventually we end up consuming ourselves.

[20 : 11] And so I think the call to death is not death to the individual, but death to hyper individuality, death to consumerism, death to estrangement, this idea that I have to do it on my own, I am the only one that matters.

For a seed to fall to the ground and die, it does have to recognize that its life, its purpose of multiplication, is going to require a sense of burial.

So there's death to individualism, and then there's also death to, I'm going to introduce a word to you today, kairarchy. Kairarchy. Now when you're a preacher at a church like The Table, sometimes you wish you had a word for, deep breath, sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, anti-Catholicism, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, classism, xenophobia, economic injustice, the prison industrial complex, colonialism, and militarism, and ethnocentrism, and speciesism, and linguisticism, and other forms of dominating hierarchies which the subordination of one person or group to the other is internalized and institutionalized.

Sometimes you wish you had a single word for that. And so I want to introduce this word to you, kairarchy. It's coined by a Harvard professor, a feminist theologian named Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza.

And she recognized that you have all of these interlocking systems of domination and oppression that we often name. Sometimes we name them in our introductions, like the announcement sort of spiel at the beginning.

[21 : 50] We follow the way of Jesus. We have this vision and mission and values, and that calls us to be against these systems of oppression. And so Professor Fiorinza coined this term.

It's two Greek words. Kyrios means lord or master. Arche means the reign or rule of. And so we live in a system of this reign or rule of lords and mastering and oppression and domination, which pits us against each other.

You know, if you're familiar with, you know, intersectionality, all of the ways that our individual and collective beings are pitted against each other and put in pyramids of hierarchy and privilege and domination.

And what I think, and I've preached a little bit on this before, when Jesus calls us to die to ourselves, to when Paul says, I die daily, when we are called to fall into the ground like a seed and die in order to be raised to new life, I think part of what we are dying to is all the lies that we have been told about ourselves and the communities that we belong to.

To die to the lie that it is a zero-sum game that if I'm not winning, then you must be, and if you start winning, I start losing. To die to that lie.

[23 : 07] To die to the lies that say that my identity is not good enough. To die to the lies that say that every bit of shame and guilt that's ever been heaped upon me is true. To die to the lies that keep me buried and dead and gone forever.

To die to hierarchy means to become alive to what God says is true of us. That we are beloved, that we are created in the image of God.

And that what is true of Jesus is true of us, that we are beloved children of the divine. And so I think the call to death is not just a losing of myself, but it's rather a letting go of the baggage that's been placed on me.

I also think part of the dying to oneself is dying to independence. And I mean this in the sort of hyper-independence sense. Yes, we all should be independent in the ability to care for ourselves so that we can care for one another.

But again, just as there is the hyper-individualism, there's also the hyper-independence that I never need anyone's help. I don't need to rely on anyone. I believe that I've got this on my own and I'm actually affronted and offended if you offer to help me because that somehow tells me I'm not good enough.

[24 : 32] And I know that I need to die to that in particular. I grew up in an environment that taught me that I was on my own, that I had to take care of everyone else and I could not, I didn't have any care to receive from anyone else and so why would I start receiving that now?

And I think the call to die, to be buried like a seed, is to no longer believe that I'm on my own. Because when a seed is buried, what actually happens is that it breaks open its shell and it starts being dependent on that whole ecosystem that's under the ground, under the dirt, of soil and water and nitrogen and all those things that make a plant grow.

But as long as that shell stays on that seed and that it never interacts with anything, then it's going to be stuck like that forever. So there's the call.

To die. And then there's the call to become truly alive, to become the living among the dead. In literature and in movies, there's this idea of prolepsis.

And it's when the end, something true about the end, sort of flashes into the middle or the present of the story. This is true of the resurrection, that when Jesus was resurrected from the grave, we're getting a glimpse of what is going to be true of everyone when God recreates the heavens and the earth.

[26 : 02] And so when Jesus calls us to die so that we can come alive, we are going to be living in sort of embodiments of prolepsis, that if we come truly alive today, then we are a glimpse of the future.

We are a glimpse of what is going to be true of all creation. And again, a few ways that I think this is true. We become alive to our true selves.

The idea of dying to self to become alive to true self, there's so much resistance to this. Dying to self sounds so scary, especially when it's been used in sort of authoritarian, domineering environments where dying to self meant, hey, die to your opinion, die to your beliefs, die to your values, so that you can take on the values of the one in charge.

I get that. I hear that. I've been there. True dying to the false self, to becoming alive to the true self, is when we actually die to the Kyriarchy, we die to the lies that have been told about us so that we can become alive to what is actually true.

I'm going to read to you an extended quote. This comes from C.S. Lewis' Mere Christianity. This is what Lewis writes. He says, the more we get what we now call ourselves out of the way and let him, Jesus, take us over, the more truly ourselves we become.

[27 : 29] It's no good trying to be myself without Jesus, without God, without our creator. Because the more I resist him and try to live on my own, the more I become dominated by my own heredity and upbringing and surroundings and natural desires, what today we're calling the Kyriarchy, our culture, our systems of domination.

I'll read that again. So the more I tried to resist my creator and try to live on my own, the more I just become dominated by my own heredity and upbringing and surroundings and natural desires. In fact, what I so proudly call myself becomes merely the meeting place for the trains of events which I never started and which I cannot stop.

What I call my wishes become merely the desires thrown up by my physical organism or pumped into me by other human thoughts or even suggested to me by devils. Until you have given up yourself to him, you will not have a real self.

Sameness is to be found among most natural men, not among those who surrender to Christ. How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been and how gloriously different are the saints.

Even in social life, you will never make a good impression on other people until you stop thinking about what sort of impression you are making. In literature and art, no person who bothers about originality will ever be original.

[28 : 51] Whereas if you simply try to tell the truth without carrying two pence, how often it has been told before, you will nine times out of ten become original without ever having noticed it.

This principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose yourself and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and your favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end.

Submit with every fiber of your being and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing, nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead.

Look for yourself and you will only find in the long run only hatred and loneliness and despair and rage and ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find him and with him everything else thrown in.

And so I think the call to die and the call to come alive is to refuse to be zombified, to refuse to be consumed by our culture of domination and to refuse to believe the lie that says that you have to fight for your own will and it's only then that you can be yourself but rather to have this magnificent trust creator God who made us in their image and says come to me and the rest will come alive.

[30 : 16] Secondly, we've become alive to collective liberation. Over the past six weeks we were talking about what it means to be a liberating church. We've talked about the idea that nobody is free until everybody is free.

And so how do I think about my part in making sure that everybody is free? It's not hyper-individualism, it's not enmeshment, it's not estrangement, it's empathy and it's care for the well-being of others and other communities.

And when I become alive to that then we all mutually benefit, we all become more free together. Paul puts it like this in Galatians chapter 5, he says, you were called to freedom brothers and sisters, siblings, only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses that serve each other through love.

which brings me to the last point of becoming alive to authentic community. We cannot do this alone. And I think this is often where we get tripped up, where the sort of call to die and become alive becomes this merely individual impulse that we have to act on rather than the impulse of the community.

As one community organizer puts it, the forces of injustice are often ruthless and so well-funded. And so if we are going to become a force for God's liberative power in the world, if we are going to die and be buried and then be raised to life and experience multiplication, which means freedom for more, then that means that we have to do it together.

[31 : 54] And so it's not independence, it's not interdependence, it's not codependence, it's interdependence, a realization that we cannot do this alone. Now to conclude, I want to bring up a parable, an analogy by the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard who lived in the 1800s.

And this is a real parable that Kierkegaard told. He said, imagine there's a medicine that you use to battle, this is his words, to battle constipation.

You've got to love philosophers. And imagine there's this medicine that you use to battle constipation and you give it to a patient, you're a doctor, you give it to the patient and the patient's like, well, yes, I have constipation but only a little bit.

So I'm just going to take a half dose. But unfortunately, this medicine is, if you take a half dose, it actually makes the constipation worse.

And so, again, Kierkegaard's words, the patient takes the half dose and ends up exploding from the outside. Gross imagery, okay? I'm sorry, I just wanted to quote the philosopher.

[33 : 05] I think oftentimes when we look at the words of Scripture, when we look at the words of Jesus, we want to take the half dose. We want to take just enough of Jesus' advice to sort of inoculate us against loneliness and estrangement and codependence.

But as Lewis would say, it's that half dose, as Kierkegaard would say, it's that half dose that actually can be the most deadly. Because it convinces us that it's just enough and it doesn't actually push us over to the edge of being fully dependent on Christ, fully dependent on God, and fully interdependent as a community.

And so as we think about what it means to not be zombified by our culture, not turned into sort of lifeless, soulless beings, all competing for some finite number of resources, all trying to treat ourselves and not thinking of the other, and rather than just sort of dipping our toes into what it might like, might be like to not do that, rather I think the call is death.

Not a half death and not a half life, but the whole thing. Because again, to quote Lewis, keep nothing back. nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours.

Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. And it is my hope and my prayer that all of us and every part of us will be raised from the dead. Will you pray with me?

[34 : 45] Jesus, you, you do not hold back. Sometimes you use words that I wish you did not use. Sometimes you invite us into things that I wish that you did not invite us to.

And yet I also, God, cannot help but trust you, knowing the ways that you have brought rescue and recovery into my life and the life of so many people I love. And also trusting that you promise that your way is easy, your yoke is light, your burden is not burdensome.

You said that you wanted to give us life and life abundantly. And so, God, I pray for myself and I pray for this congregation that we would trust that if you are calling us into death, calling us to be buried like a seed, that out of that you are going to bring something even better than we can imagine.

So, God, help us to put to death, to crucify all the lies that have been told about us, all the lies that are dominating oppressive culture, the hierarchy, continues to want to throw at us.

God, help us to put to death even the parts of me that I feel like haven't been tainted. Because I know, in fact, that you want to bring new life to every single atom, every single part of my being.

[36 : 12] God, we believe you. Help our unbelief. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.