

# Faith Matters

WRITTEN BY MATT DODRILL, SENIOR PASTOR, PULASKI HEIGHTS BAPTIST CHURCH

At the Agiou Pavlou Monastery on Mount Athos, there's an old inscription that hangs over the doorway which reads, "If you die before you die, then you won't die when you die."

This profound saying isn't all that different from what Jesus says in the Gospel of John: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

In our death-defying culture, we might find this sentiment a bit off-putting. That death provides a doorway to life, or that death is a prerequisite to bearing fruit, seems backward to us. We would rather get out of life alive, thank you very much. Why should we put ourselves through the trouble of going through death if we want to live?

The Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe once said that reality can be characterized by two antithetical truths which express the tragedy of the human condition: "The first is that if you do not love, you will not be alive; the second is that if you do



love, you will be killed. If you cannot love, you remain self-enclosed and sterile, unable to create a future for yourself or others, unable to live. If, however, you do effectively love, you will be a threat to the structures of domination upon which our human society rests, and you will be killed."

To live is to love, and self-giving love is seldom tolerated in a world filled with hate, so a person's willingness to die for the sake of love is the true marker of a life well lived. And to be clear, dying takes many forms. The courageous child who stands up for a classmate who's being bullied at school risks being ostracized or subjected to reprisal. She probably won't be killed, but by forfeiting her own sense of comfort and social standing, she dies to herself. The board member who refuses to abide by his company's exploitative practices risks unemployment, but his integrity — and his love of neighbor — is worth the price.

Death, then, if it is eventuated by a self-sacrificial act of love, bears much fruit.

Just consider the leaves of the trees this time of year. The red sugar maples and scarlet oaks are bursting with brilliant crimson, set ablaze in the crisp autumn air. Oddly enough, these dazzling colors indicate that the leaves are dying. As the days get shorter and the chlorophyll breaks down, the green color fades away, and the yellow and red pigments become visible in all their glory — like a burning bush. It's an odd convergence of splendor and death. Paradoxically, the trees seem most alive during the process of death.

The amazing thing about the burning bush, which Moses encounters at Mount Horeb, is that even as the bush is set ablaze, it is not consumed. Even as it undergoes a process of purification (a death of sorts), it doesn't die. Again: an odd convergence of splendor and death.

A life well lived is like a burning bush in the autumn hills of central Arkansas. In giving itself away in death, it shines brighter than the sun.



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