

“Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral.”

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, 1986

2023 LIFEWATCH SERMON

HOPE ALWAYS:

HOW TO BE A FORCE FOR LIFE IN A CULTURE OF SUICIDE

by Dr. Matthew Sleeth

In the coming year, ten million Americans are going to struggle with a decision. It will not be an easy one. The stakes are enormous—bigger than whom to marry, what school to go to, or where to live. All of the ten million individuals are wrestling with a voice telling them to end their lives.

Ten million is a big number, so great it is hard to understand. Nothing in my day-to-day world helps me comprehend a number that large. I do not have ten million dollars, or ten million of anything that I can count. If ten million people were to stretch out and hold hands, the line would go from Boston to Los Angeles and back again. The population of Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts all together is roughly ten million.

No society in all of human history has thought so much about, or acted so often to commit, suicide. Not one. Either we have built an unlivable world, or we are treating melancholy wrong, or both.

The Hippocratic Oath and the Bible

Before we delve deeper, let me explain where I am coming from. I am trained as a physician. I specialized in emergency medicine. Emergency departments in America are on the front lines when it comes to suicide.

When I became a doctor, I did not believe in God, but I did believe in the Hippocratic Oath. The Hippocratic Oath precedes Christianity by four centuries and states that a physician will never kill someone—nor will the physician help someone to kill himself or anyone else. When I graduated from medical school, it just made sense to me that *doctors should be about the business of easing suffering and preserving life.* (emphasis added) Period.

When I was in my late 40's, I read a Bible for the first time, and I became a Christian. Becoming a follower of Christ changed a lot of things in my life. Christ says that the work of his followers is to believe him. We have to trust that what he says is right is right, and what he says is wrong is wrong. That meant I stopped doing many things I had thought were okay, and I also had to start doing things I had never done before.

But in the area of doctors holding all life to be sacred, I found that the Bible was in complete agreement with the Hippocratic Oath. I think that is one of the reasons why the largest portion of the New Testament was written by a Greek physician named Luke. As an atheist physician, I reasoned that life was to be guarded, and as a Christian one, I hold the same belief as an article of faith.

Science may explain the mechanisms of human life, but the Bible explains the reason. When King David wrote about life 3,000 years ago, he described God's handiwork: "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it well." (Psalm 139:13-14)

From the moment God knit us together to the last breath we exhale, you and I are nothing short of a miracle. More than any other group in society, physicians should be the guardians of life, and we should exercise that role in every stage of life, from conception to natural death. Abortion and euthanasia are wrong. Suicide is wrong. That is where I am coming from.

Suicide in America

So, from both a medical and a Christian perspective, just how bad is the suicide situation in America today?

A suicide attempt happens every 22 seconds in the U.S. One life is lost to suicide every 11 minutes.

To put into perspective how common suicide has become, for every murder you hear about, there are two and a half times more suicides. Suicide is now the leading cause of death among 13-year-olds. In my city, during a three-month period, we had a 10-, 11-, 12-, 13- and 14-year-old all die by suicide.

But what do these numbers mean? Is this just the way it is? Has it always been this way? One way of measuring suicide rates is to number them in occurrences per hundred thousand per year. Our current suicide rate is 14.5 per 100,000 people per year. This ties the all-time high for suicide in our country set in the aptly named Great Depression.

"Okay," you might say, "the suicide rate is bad now, but it has been this bad before."

Well, not actually. You see what has skewed the meaning of these statistics is modern medicine.

Unlike the 1930's, today most people who attempt suicide are rescued from it. If we find someone in trouble,

we can activate a universal 911 system. A single ambulance has more equipment on it to save lives today than an entire hospital had in the 1930s. We can reverse overdoses of everything from narcotics to benzodiazepines to acetaminophen to digoxin. We can dialyze off poisons. If an overdose wipes out people's respiratory drive, we have mechanical ventilators to breathe for them. Modern medicine saves the vast majority of those who attempt suicide—thank God!

But what would happen if we did not have modern medicine? If all that was available was the technology that existed in the 1930s, we would have somewhere between half a million and a million deaths by suicide in the coming year. That means that without the invention and intervention of modern medicine, our suicide rate would be 100 to 200 times higher than it was in 1930. In fact, we are at a place no society in history has ever been. Modern medicine is simply hiding the true extent of society's despair.

Faith Protects

Now that we better understand the extent of our suicide problem, what should we do? Mental-health experts have recommended that we make screening for depression more available, that we de-stigmatize marginalized groups, and that everyone have access to crisis counseling.

But here is the problem: for several decades, America has done virtually everything recommended by mental-health workers, and for the last twenty years the suicide rate has increased by about 2 percent per year. Should we just keep doing more of the same and expect a different result?

When I went to medical school decades ago, we were taught that faith has a protective role in suicide. Committed Christians are somewhere between 4 to 6 times less likely to commit suicide than atheists. The landmark study of this phenomenon was first noted by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), a French sociologist, in his 1897 book *Suicide*. Since then, countless studies in Western society have confirmed his findings. However, reading the current 62-page report from the Centers for Disease Control on preventing suicide, you will find all mention of the protective role of faith has been subtracted.

There's a glaring but little discussed quandary in trying to understand and prevent suicide solely through a secular-scientific lens. You see, we share chemistry, physiology, and many diseases with other animals. But suicide is a purely human phenomenon. There is no animal model for studying suicide. No Zebra since the dawn of time ever woke up and said, "To heck with it. Today, I am not going to run from the lion." You and I come hard wired to protect and defend ourselves. We have thousands of preinstalled feedback loops in our bodies and brains, both conscious and unconscious, to keep us alive. Everything about our early education reinforces and teaches this, from "do not step onto the road," to "do not touch something that is hot." So why are we killing ourselves?

Turn to the Bible

Regardless of all the miracles and advances of modern medicine, it is only when we open the pages of the Bible that we can actually get a clear explanation of where suicide came from and why it persists. How far into the Bible do we have to read until we find humans doing something that will result in their own death? One page. God says to Adam, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17) You

do this, and you will kill yourselves, God is saying.

So, what happened? Adam and Eve ate the poison apple. They pulled the trigger. They swallowed the handful of pills. They jumped.

Now the interesting thing is, they were not alone when they did this. With them, there was a character described as a serpent. Also known as Satan, this shadowy figure was right there, urging them to kill themselves. Throughout the Bible, and throughout time, this is going to be Satan's method of operating.

What we learn in the opening pages of the Bible is that God gives life, and Satan takes it away. No other sacred text that I am aware of begins by telling humanity where the paradox that underlies the human condition comes from: that is, that we alone of all the creatures on earth are drawn to things that kill us.

In fact, every time Satan shows up in the Bible, he is trying to destroy a life. When Satan appears in the book of Job, he tries to get Job to despair and take his own life (Job 2). When Satan shows up at the beginning of Christ's ministry, he tries to get Jesus to jump off the top of the Temple (Matthew 4 and Luke 4). When Satan shows up at the end of Christ's earthly life, he enters into Judas, and Judas kills himself (Matthew 27). Whenever Satan shows up in Scripture, he leaves a trail of dead bodies behind.

I want to pause here and discuss a curious incident recorded in the Bible. Jesus sailed across the Sea of Galilee to a region called Gerasenes. Jesus is going from a Hebrew area into a non-Hebrew one. There he finds a man who is described as being naked, out of his mind, and possessed by demons. (Luke 8:26-39) Now, some today might dismiss a description of someone being possessed of demons or Satan. But they have never worked with the mentally ill. It is stunning how many suicide notes are left where people say they can no longer deal with the demons that haunt them.

In Gerasenes, Jesus is moved by compassion to heal this man, and he throws the demons out of him into a large herd of swine. And what does this herd of pigs go and do? The one thing animals never do: they go and kill themselves.

Jesus summed up Satan's motives this way: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

If you or someone you know ever hears a voice urging suicide or that the world would be better off with them dead—that is Satan's voice, the voice of humanity's arch enemy. Do not listen to it!

Remember that I said Christians are four to six times less likely to commit suicide than atheists? Christians think about suicide as often as others; they just do not act on those thoughts at the same rate.

In fact, throughout history many famous Christians have struggled with depression. Charles Spurgeon, the man who earned the title "The Prince of Preachers," battled depression. Mother Teresa struggled with depression. Likewise with Henry Nouwen, C.S. Lewis, and George Frederic Handel.

With God's Help

The Bible is also filled with historical examples of people who are at the end of their rope. Moses comes to the point of wanting to die—likewise with Elijah, Jonah, King David, and Paul the Apostle.

But if you examine each of these Biblical stories, you will find that when they communicate their pain to God, they are

given the strength to overcome. Sometimes God gives them a helper, or in Moses' case—70 helpers. Sometimes they are given a new job, or fed, or offered a cold drink, or tucked into bed.

The point of these stories is that we do not need to hide our despondency from God. God is well aware that you and I are subject to the blues. The author of Psalm 22 says: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint...thou hast brought me into the dust of death." The author of Psalm 88 pens a lament of depression addressed to God in which he says he is stumbling about like the walking dead. The Bible contains dozens and dozens of passages meant to lift us when we are low. It also contains passages that reassure us that God loves us and that we are never alone in our suffering.

But what if, despite all interventions and efforts, a loved one takes his own life? The hurt, anger, guilt, and grief left behind can be overwhelming. In such circumstances, I am often asked: Is suicide an unforgivable sin?

Let us tackle that question head on. First, I think that the Bible clearly states that killing someone is a sin. There is the straightforward commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." In the New Testament, we find similar warnings, in passages such as I Corinthians 3:16-17: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy and you are that temple."

The Bible is pretty clear on the gravity of killing something created in the image of God.

However, I believe that there are those individuals who can get to a place where they do not know up from down, and right from wrong. If they placed their trust in Christ when their mind was working, I believe that they can find hope in Scripture.

In Romans, chapter 8, the Apostle Paul writes: "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (verses 38-39)

In other words, the work of Jesus on the cross is sufficient to atone for any sin you and I commit—but we have to put our trust in Christ.

There are literally thousands of books about why people kill themselves. When I began researching the Biblical worldview of suicide, I wanted to learn not why people killed themselves, but rather why Christians who had struggled with depression and thought about suicide did *not* act on those thoughts. If we are trying to prevent suicide, does it not make sense to study those who have overcome it?

Again and again, I was given two reasons by those who had come to the edge and backed away.

First, they were afraid of what God would do after they died. Fear can be a good thing. It is one of the mechanisms that protects us. In fact, the Bible says that "[t]he fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Proverbs 9:10)

The second reason was a concern for how their suicide would harm those left behind. I do not think there is a more telling quality of a follower of Jesus than that they are more concerned about others than themselves.

So, fear of consequences and concern for others are key in helping us overcome suicidal impulses.

Becoming a Force for Life

As Christians, we are called to help the people in our communities and congregations impacted by mental-health struggles. Yet in most churches, I have noticed a reluctance to talk about suicide and other mental-health issues. This silence is not Biblical. As followers of Jesus, we are supposed to get our lead from him.

In Jesus' ministry of healing, he made absolutely no distinction between mental and physical illness. Actually, that is not quite true. Remember the incident of Jesus healing the possessed man in Gerasenes? In fact, Jesus the kosher rabbi went out of his way to a stinking pig farm to rescue that man from mental illness.

God is in the life business—physically, mentally, and spiritually. If someone you know is suffering, tell him you have noticed that he seems down lately and ask how he is doing. Listen well and follow up. Send a card or handwritten letter. Pick up the phone and call. I have found that when I ask someone if I can pray for him, he almost always says yes. Stop and pray with him, and then continue to pray for him. Perhaps one of the greatest causes for so many wanting to take their own lives is a lack of those willing to give their lives in service to others.

Proverbs 24:11-12 is a call to action: "[I]f you hold back from rescuing those taken away to death, those who go staggering to the slaughter; if you say, 'Look, we did not know this'—does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it? And will he not repay all according to their deeds?" (NRSV)

As followers of Christ, we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. When one person takes his own life, the whole world grows a little dimmer.

Part of what gives us purpose, meaning, and even happiness is caring for others and loving others. This includes offering our family members and neighbors the light that cannot be extinguished, the hope that always endures.

Let me close with a poem from my book [Hope Always](#).

To you who struggle and struggled and endure
Bearing a cross upon your shoulders,
The weight known only to God;
We who love and have loved you,
Salute you,
And cry tears of thanks that God
Has given you the strength and courage to see
Another day.
Our prayer:
That you walk with God's face upon you,
Stepping out of cast shadows,
Into his light,
And that you hope,
Always and forever.
Amen and amen!

Matthew Sleeth, MD, is the executive director of Blessed Earth. He is the author of [Hope Always: How to Be a Force for Life in a Culture of Suicide](#) (2021) and several other books and many articles. To access the Hope Always Toolkit, including hundreds of free, downloadable, practical resources, visit blessedearth.org or matthewsleethmd.com. ♥

A WRITTEN MESSAGE

The sermon above was preached in the Simpson Memorial Chapel, which is located in The United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill, Washington, DC. The chapel offers a guest book in which visitors can leave handwritten messages. On January 20, Dr. Sleeth, the preacher of the 2023 Lifewatch Sermon, wrote the following: “I came here for a service on the sanctity of human life. I thought of John Wesley’s thoughts....”

Then he quoted, from memory, Wesley’s famous statement that reads: “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

The good doctor concluded: “Only God can revive this shell of the church. I pray that he does.” ♥

AN UNDELIVERED SPEECH

On November 19, 2022—a Saturday (during college football season!)—a special session of the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church took place at Methodist University in Fayetteville, NC. This special session was called to ratify (or not) the disaffiliation of approximately 250 congregations from the North Carolina Conference (which totaled approximately 750 congregations). In the power of the Holy Spirit, Bishop Leonard Fairley spoke words of lament and hope, which moved the conference to the greatest unity possible on that day. Toward the end of the morning, the conference voted overwhelmingly to ratify the disaffiliation of the 250 local churches.

Having written a three-minute speech to address the bishops’ responsibility in causing the slow-motion schism now underway in The United Methodist Church, your scribe was ready to offer the following speech. However, because the conference voted to end debate and proceed immediately to the ratification vote, the speech was not delivered. Perhaps even at this late date, it will be of some interest.

I rise to speak for ratifying the disaffiliation of congregations from The United Methodist Church.

Since 1999, I co-chaired the Bishop’s Unity Dialogue on the Church and Homosexuality. In 2014, I co-authored “A Plea for Unity in The United Methodist Church.” At the 2014 Annual Conference, you voted overwhelmingly to affirm this Plea.

The Plea challenges: “All United Methodists must acknowledge and abide by the church order contained in The Book of Discipline.... When actions of conscientious objection are employed, disciplinary consequences are to be expected and accepted.”

This Plea was not heeded by bishops. Consider.

>>The Council of Bishops welcomed into its membership people whose lives blatantly contradict church teaching and discipline.

>>Bishops allowed Special General Conference 2019 to be disrupted.

>>Bishops announced strong opposition to 2019’s decisions.

>>Bishops in dissent were neither admonished nor disciplined.

>>Bishops in dissent refused to communicate with covenant-keeping elders.

Bishop Fairley, our bishop, kept covenant. Other bishops broke covenant. Their example spread covenant-breaking throughout The United Methodist Church, to: general boards and agencies, Jurisdictional Conferences, Annual Conferences, conference committees, local churches, clergy, and laity. The United Methodist Church became ungovernable.

That is our recent history. We must remember.

As co-chair of the Unity Dialogue, as co-author of “A Plea for Unity,” I have labored for the unity of the North Carolina Conference and The United Methodist Church. However, bishops broke covenant. They led others to break covenant. Their refusal to abide by the decisions of General Conference, on homosexuality-related matters, made the church ungovernable. That compelled many congregations to disaffiliate. Therefore, I urge you to vote to ratify their disaffiliation. Vote to ratify. Thank you. (PTS) ♥

LYING UNDERCUTS DEMOCRACY

Tulsi Gabbard was elected to four terms in Congress (2013-2021) as a Democrat. Now a declared political Independent, she is a United States Army Reserve officer and a political commentator.

During the last week of 2022, Gabbard anchored Tucker Carlson Tonight (TCT) on the Fox News Channel (FNC) for a few nights. Early in that week, Gabbard conducted a tough interview with George Santos, a Republican recently elected to the United States Congress by NY-3 voters. Since his election, Santos has been found to have told lies about his identity and life. When Gabbard asked Santos about his work history, he noted that a thorough reply would be “way above the American people’s heads.” Gabbard responded that he was “insulting their intelligence,” and that he had just demonstrated the “depth of [his] deception.”

On December 29, 2022, while again hosting TCT, Gabbard offered a monologue—the video of which is available on the FNC website—that demands attention. Below are significant portions from, and summaries of, Gabbard’s commentary.

Gabbard began: “After that interview [with Santos], we [TCT] heard from a lot of people from all ends of the political spectrum. There were some conservatives who were suggesting that Santos’ lies paled in comparison to the lies told by top Democrats about their own personal lives. They also suggested: even if Santos is a liar, it is better for the country if Republicans hold onto as many seats as possible in the House. Now on the liberal side, this show received praise from outlets and people that are normally attacking us. Many are welcoming the federal and local investigations into George Santos that have begun—even though it is not quite yet clear what crime he may have committed. Now some of the architects of the Russia-collusion hoax, like disgraced FBI agent Peter Strzok, were especially thrilled. In fact, Strzok is now on social media implying—without any evidence, no surprise—that Santos may be a pawn of Russian intelligence.

“Now if you are like most Americans, you care about the truth more than partisan politics. But unfortunately, there are too many politicians and cable-news shows that only care about raw partisan-political calculation, and that is why they are not willing to call out anyone on their own team. As a result, permanent Washington is overrun with liars and

opportunists who have no problem whatsoever deceiving the American people just to further their own interests.

“Now in our interview, George Santos invoked lies by Democrats as an excuse for his own lies. It is inexcusable.”

Gabbard went on to name two of the liars: Joe Biden on being arrested in South Africa and on padding his resume, and Hillary Clinton on being shot at while visiting Iraq.

Then Gabbard commented: “But the point here is that lying politicians are nothing new. George Santos’ lies are inexcusable. But let’s be real. He is a small fish in a sea of sharks in Washington, who have been deceiving us for a very long time, and at great cost and consequence to the American people, our security and our freedom.

“Every one of our elected leaders in Washington has taken an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. There is no greater form of disrespect of democracy and the Constitution and the American people than lying and attempting to deceive us.

“Yet we have far too many people leading our nation’s institutions—in Congress, in the executive branch, in the national-security state, in the mainstream media, and in these Big-Tech companies—who actually believe that it is acceptable to deceive us. They often justify these deceptions by saying, as George Santos did on Tuesday, that the American people just can’t handle the truth; or that they know about what is best for us, better than we do. But when leaders use deception to manipulate us and get what they want, then We the People can’t make informed decisions. That’s not a functioning democracy. That’s a dictatorship.”

Then came another list of intentional deceivers who have undermined American democracy: Big Media and Big Tech suppressed the Hunter-Biden-laptop story days before the 2020 election; Democrat, Republican, and Pentagon leaders claimed to be “winning the war in Afghanistan...[so] send more troops;” the Food and Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control lied to get people to take the Covid shots; Anthony Fauci bent the truth on cloth masks and “about his role in funding dangerous gain-of-function research;” James Clapper (former DNI) and John Brennan (former CIA director) lied under oath about “collecting data on U.S. citizens” and “illegally tapping U.S. Senators’ phones,” respectively; the FBI and the Department of Justice intentionally told falsehoods about the Steele dossier; and the FBI relied on “falsified information” to obtain warrants “to illegally spy on American citizens.”

Gabbard concluded: “These people have created a culture where lies and deceit are normalized. They are acceptable, even justified, in their own minds.

“In all of these examples that I have cited, they have expressed no remorse. There has been no accountability.

“The survival of our democracy depends on our ability—We the People’s ability—to trust that those who lead these institutions in our society. Like I said, in Congress, in the executive branch, in the security state, as well as in the mainstream media and Big Tech, they must be led by people of integrity, who are committed to protecting our democracy and our freedom, and serving the best interests of the American people and our country.”

Lifewatch seldom ventures into the rough waters of American politics. However, Tulsi Gabbard’s commentary is too stirring and too significant to ignore. (PTS) ♥

NPRC SUPPORTS FRANK PAVONE

For years, Rev. Frank Pavone, a Catholic priest, has directed Priests for Life and presided over the National Pro-Life Religious Council (NPRC). He continues to do so. He has been a major voice—if not the major voice—in American society for protecting the unborn child and mother from abortion. His clear, steady, decisive witness faithfully serves the Gospel of Life in American public life—which includes the political arena.

In mid-December, the Vatican announced the dismissal of Rev. Pavone from the priesthood. This apparently hamfisted exercise of Church discipline demonstrates no love and no reason. Church discipline, that is faithful to the Gospel, must include love and reason—and hope for resolution.

Lifewatch is privileged to be a member of the NPRC and to have the opportunity to minister with Frank Pavone. He is a friend, an exemplary witness to the Gospel of Life, a source of encouragement. After the Vatican’s action against Rev. Pavone, on January 10, 2023, NPRC released the following statement in support of Pavone.

“The National Pro-Life Religious Council (NPRC) stands with the pro-life community here and abroad in support of Fr. Frank Pavone’s ministry as priest, president of NPRC, and leader of Priests for Life. In post-Roe America such leadership is needed more than before. Efforts to curtail this leadership fly in the face of the commitment of Christians who stand for the building of a culture of life.

“Recognizing that the ministry of every priest and pastor is imperfect, NPRC supports Frank Pavone in working with Church officials to reinstate his priesthood.

“Justice requires fair and consistent treatment. We believe that such has not occurred in the treatment of Fr. Frank Pavone. There is reason to believe that efforts of some ecclesiastical leaders to curtail Fr. Pavone’s voice and ministry are motivated more by political concerns, than those of the Gospel. Such politically motivated actions harm the work of the millions of pro-life Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, to save the lives of unborn children and their families.

“The NPRC is thankful for Fr. Pavone’s leadership, and joins others in prayer for him, his ministry on behalf of the unborn, and the hope that his standing will soon be restored. His situation is a reminder to us all that faithfulness to the Gospel of Life is and will be costly, and that we must put our trust not in princes (including those of the Church), but in the living God who gives justice to the oppressed.” (PTS) ♥

ANOTHER GOOD DOCTOR

Dr. Kristin Collier is an assistant professor of Internal Medicine at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. She also directs the Program on Health, Spirituality, and Religion.

Dr. Collier was invited to deliver the keynote address at the University of Michigan Medical School’s 2022 white coat ceremony, which each year initiates the entering medical class into the study of medicine. Before the ceremony, some at Michigan protested against this invitation to Dr. Collier, because she is pro-life. They intensified their protest and demanded that her participation in the annual ceremony be canceled. Because of the wisdom and courage of the administration, Dr. Collier spoke. With dignity and

self-possession, she addressed the new med students and their families—even as some in the crowd walked out of the auditorium in protest.

Human Beings Caring for Other Human Beings

Dr. Collier spoke about doctors and patients in a person-centered way: “You will soon start learning a lot of biochemistry. A lot of pharmacology. A lot of histology. And that’s great. The science is beautiful, and there is so much science to know. But the risk of this education, and one that I fell into, was that you can come out of medical school with a reductionist, mechanistic view of people and ultimately of yourself. You can easily end up seeing your patients as just a bag of blood and bones, or viewing life as mere molecules in motion.

“I assume that most of you didn’t come into medicine to take care of a receptor, a symptom, an organ, or even a disease. These things are important, but they are inside human beings. Don’t take your eye off the ball. You are not technicians taking care of complex machines, but human beings taking care of other human beings. And human beings are fallible. You will soon learn all the ways in which human bodies are fallible, and this profession can test the limits of your bodies as well. Unlike a machine, you do need sleep, food, rest, relationships, and most of all love.

“Medicine is an embodied profession in which two people come together in one of the most sacred relationships that there is. Get to know your patients as *human beings*—not just their scans, labs, chemistries, and data. The disease may not be unique, but every person is. Let’s resist a view of our patients and ourselves that strips us of our humanity and takes away from the very reason most of [us] entered this profession in the first place: to take care of human beings in their moments of greatest need.”

A Doctor Becomes a Patient

Dr. Collier illustrated person-centered medicine by telling a story: “When I was a third-year resident here, my chief resident Jake became ill, and he became the one in the sick bed. He had been interviewing for a competitive fellowship position in academic cardiology. He had been losing weight, looking tired, but we all knew he had been busy. He kept telling us that he had been busy. One night, shortly after arriving home from a flight, he arrived at our emergency department with shortness of breath. It was discovered that he had massively enlarged liver due to the presence of multiple, terrible masses. We were hoping that this was something easy. Or at least easier than what he ended up having. But what he had was bad and ended up taking his life.

“It was over the course of the year that our institution watched our friend die. But we also saw him live. And it was painful. And what was even more shocking to us, at some level, was that we couldn’t save one of our own. Here we were, at one of the largest academic hospitals in the world, with all the technology and treatments at our disposal—the Chair of Medicine at the time was an oncologist, for God’s sake—yet Jake got sicker. We couldn’t cure him. He died. On our watch.

“We lost our friend, and the world lost a great son, husband, brother, and doctor. Collectively, we lost the deeply held belief that medicine could be our savior. What had happened, in part, is that many of us had made medicine into what theologians call an idol. We had placed unrealistic

expectations on medicine that it didn’t deserve and couldn’t live up to. When our idols come crashing down, pain ensues. But the right order of things shines out of that darkness. I have since grown to understand the limits of medicine, which have helped me grow into a better person.”

Dr. Collier concluded her speech to the first-year medical students: “The great philosopher Alasdair McIntyre once said that before you ask yourself ‘what am I to do?,’ you must answer the question ‘of what story am I a part?’ You are now part of the story of medicine that is rich in both tragedy and joy. You have the potential to shape the future of medicine’s story if you resist the temptation to see yourself and others as machine, if you ask big questions, and if you practice gratitude along the way. Welcome to the profession of medicine, and Go Blue.”

What a beautiful statement about the person-centered practice of medicine. And it was almost canceled. So often, what looks like a disaster area turns into a glorious moment. (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- Thank you for responding to Lifewatch’s December 1 fundraising letter and for supporting our witness. Because of your financial gifts, Lifewatch can keep pointing Methodists, United and Global, to the Gospel of Life. Your future gifts to Lifewatch can be given in three ways. First, you can write a check to “Lifewatch,” and send it to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. Second, you can give stocks by contacting Mrs. Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. And third, if you are over the age of 72, you can donate a gift from your IRA as a tax-free distribution. (This means a gift [up to \$100,000...!] can be transferred from your IRA directly to Lifewatch and can count toward your required minimum distribution without being considered taxable income. About this, please consult with Mrs. Evans.) Mrs. Evans and I thank God for you, for your friendship with Christ, for your prayers for Lifewatch, and for your financial support of this ministry.
- The title of the January 2, 2023 article by Steven Ertelt and Micaiah Bilger says it all: “FBI Still Hasn’t Arrested Anyone for Attacking 230 Churches and Pregnancy Centers” (at LifeNews.com). Beginning with the leak of the draft of the United States Supreme Court’s Dobbs decision, these hundreds of “acts of violence, vandalism, threats, pro-abortion lawlessness, and other incidents target[ed] pro-life Americans.”

Update. On January 24, the Department of Justice reported that it had arrested and indicted *two* abortion activists for vandalizing pregnancy resource centers. Finally. (“Antifa Extremist Charged with Attacking Pregnancy Centers, Faces 12 Years in Prison,” January 25, 2023, at LifeNews.com) Go ahead and celebrate, for two is more than zero!

By the way, the General Board of Church and Society has not acknowledged Lifewatch’s December 1, 2022 letter. That letter encouraged Church and Society to write to government agencies to urge them to uphold civil liberties, rights, and laws. To date, crickets.

- Soon after the death of Pope Benedict XVI on December 31, 2022, Dr. Edgardo Colon-Emeric, the dean of Duke Divinity School and co-chair of the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission, commented: “the death of Benedict XVI is one that touches deeply all who dream, pray, and work

for the unity of the church. His Christ-centered theological vision, love of scripture, knowledge of the church fathers, and passion for the liturgy, resonated strongly with many Methodist ecumenists and encouraged us to not settle for facile agreements—doctrine matters.” (Methodist Ecumenical Office Rome, “Methodists Worldwide React to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s Death,” January 1-2, 2023) That is a good word. As doctrine mattered to Benedict, it should matter to all Methodists!

- After Benedict XVI’s death, his “spiritual testament” was released to the public. This very interesting and inspiring document notes: “It is now sixty years that I have been accompanying the journey of Theology, particularly of the Biblical Sciences, and with the succession of different generations I have seen theses that seemed unshakable collapse, proving to be mere hypotheses: the liberal generation (Harnack, Julicher etc.), the existentialist generation (Bultmann etc.), the Marxist generation. I saw and see how out of the tangle of assumptions the reasonableness of faith emerged and emerges again. Jesus Christ is truly the way, the truth and the life—and the Church, with all its insufficiencies, is truly His body.” (Catholic News Agency, December 31, 2022)

- Also note that Dr. Ryan Danker of the John Wesley Institute wrote “Knowledge and Vital Piety: A Protestant Remembers Benedict XVI” (January 17, 2023 at www.firebrandmag.com) and your scribe “A Methodist Appreciation of Benedict XVI” (January 19, 2023 at www.firstthings.com under Web Exclusives). We—actually, most—agree that Benedict was a faithful servant of Jesus Christ and His Church.

- Rev. John Wesley’s commentary on the New Testament, Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament (1755), is one of the “doctrinal standards” in The United Methodist Church (see The Book of Discipline [2016], Par. 104, p. 77). One of the most controversial passages in the New Testament is Romans 1:18-32, which describes what happens to those who engage in idolatry. St. Paul writes that “God gave them up to degrading passions.” (1:26) So, “[m]en committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” (1:27) About this, Rev. Wesley comments: “Their idolatry, being punished with that unnatural lust, which was as horrible a dishonour to the body, as their idolatry was to God.” (Notes, Romans 1:27)

St. Paul’s grim description continues and includes “heartless” (1:31, RSV and NRSV) or “without natural affection” (KJV). About this, Rev. Wesley writes: “The custom of exposing their own new-born children to perish by cold, hunger, or wild beasts, which so generally prevailed in the heathen world, particularly among the Greeks and

Romans, was an amazing instance of this; as is also that of killing their aged and helpless parents, now common among the American heathens.” (Notes, Romans 1:31)

Rev. Wesley suggests that homosexual behavior, abortion, and euthanasia demonstrate a lack of “natural affection,” which stems from idolatry. Wesley is doctrinally correct and morally relevant.

- Some United Methodist bishops, clergy, and professors are of the opinion that Methodists are devoting too much attention to the Church’s teaching on human sexuality. Here is a strong response to those who hold that rather unoriginal opinion: “Were it not for the utter collapse of marriage in the West, the malformation and perversion of a whole generation of young people through pornography, the daily reminders that our gnostic culture promotes a view of the human person which renders the body meaningless and the Incarnation incoherent, and the Church’s own decades of failure to adequately address sexual abuse, [you] might have a point.” (Stephen P. White, “A Road to Nowhere,” *The Catholic Thing* website, January 26, 2023)

- Here are some of the most interesting signs that were displayed during the 2023 March for Life in Washington, DC: “Abortion is: Racist, Sexist, Ableist, Classist, Ageist,” “A Person’s a Person No Matter How Small,” “Be My Voice—Tell Them My Choice,” “Black Unborn Lives Matter,” “Child Sacrifice Is Not Welcome Here,” “Clump of Cells” (on a name tag), “Human Rights Begin in the Womb,” “Life Wins,” “Our salvation began with a Mother who chose life,” “RIP/ Roe vs. Wade/1973-2022” (printed on a picture of a tombstone), “Protection/@ Conception/No Exceptions,” “Save Mor Babeez” (like a Chick-fil-A ad), “Stop Calling Violence ‘Feminism,’” “Take my hand/not my life,” “This is what a Pro-Life Feminist looks like...,” and “Yo’ Mamma So Good She Kept Her Baby.” (Tyler O’Neal, “47 of the Best Signs from the First Post-Roe March for Life,” *The Daily Signal* website, 01/20/2023)

- Time for a little sports. First to football. Weeks ago, on a Sunday evening, while watching the Kansas City Chiefs play the Tennessee Titans, your editor noticed the back of the helmet worn by Chiefs’ outstanding quarterback Patrick Mahomes. It read: “Choose Love.”

On to basketball. Growing up in poverty but attending college, Sonya discovered she was pregnant. She called Planned Parenthood and scheduled an appointment for an abortion. At the appointed time, she stayed in her car on the parking lot. She changed her mind about the abortion and drove away. Recently, she said: “...my favorite scripture says that all things get worked together for the good, and those called according to His purposes and praise Jesus. It all worked out. There’s Stephen, and look what he’s doing, and

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it’s just amazing to me.” Sonya Curry was talking about her son Steph Curry, the phenomenal professional basketball star of the Golden State Warriors. (Micaiah Bilger, “Steph Curry’s Mom Thanks God for Courage to Reject Abortion,” LifeNews.com, November 11, 2022)

Inspiring signs and stories show up in the strangest places—even the NFL and the NBA. So, let them be written and printed and read....

- On Christmas Eve 2022, Bishop Tim Whitaker emailed his article “Living as a Child” to a few family members and friends. In it, he notes that Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) wrote an essay entitled “Unless You Become Like This Child.” Bp. Whitaker recaps the Catholic theologian: “Because the church is a mystery where the sacraments are celebrated and the Word proclaimed, the church cannot be merely a ‘brotherhood,’ although it is that too, for there is a ‘perennial temptation to confuse the brotherhood of the Church with a worldly democracy’ in which we rule rather than God reigns.” When one watches General Conference of The United Methodist Church, one sees people ruling. But ultimately, United Methodists trust that, somehow, Jesus Christ mysteriously reigns over the goodness and the chaos of General Conference.

- “An institution which possesses no philosophy of its own inevitably accepts that which happens to be fashionable.” Has this not been demonstrated by The United Methodist Church? This quotation, from R. H. Tawney (1880-1962, a Christian socialist in England), is quoted by Dan Hitchens in “A Twentieth-Century Prophet” (*First Things*, December 2022).

- On January 11, 2023, the United Methodist News Service’s Daily Digest carries a commentary by Dr. Amy Gordon Bono, “a United Methodist and a primary care physician who works in Nashville and Mt. Juliet, Tenn.” The article is titled “Church should update abortion stance following court decision.” This title suggests: Since the United States Supreme Court handed down its *Dobbs* decision, which overturned *Roe*, The United Methodist Church should now proceed to “update” its teaching on abortion and life.

Really? Should not the teaching of Christ’s Church on abortion and life be constant, uncompromised, and faithful to the Church’s apostolic teaching of 2,000 years—no matter what is going on in American society and its courts? When did societal or political or judicial change start determining when United Methodist teaching should change? From where did that come—other than a desire to sound, or be, “relevant?”

The United Methodist Church’s current teaching on abortion and life is far from perfect, far from faithful to apostolic teaching. (Though it could be worse.) To “update” it would most certainly make it less faithful to the Gospel of Life.

- *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* “Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail.” ♥

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