

## **LIFE IN THE FACE OF DEATH IN MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE***

**A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
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We all face the reality of death, sooner or later. How do we live in the face of that reality? Leo Tolstoy was said to have been a lifelong deathwatcher:<sup>i</sup> “The thought that he must die harassed him almost to the point of insanity...[For much of the time] He felt he could not live if there was death.”<sup>ii</sup> Ultimately, though, he came to see living in the face of death as a progression toward human and divine love, which can't be truly experienced if the reality of death is pushed aside – if we try to live a cleaned-up life in denial of its end.<sup>iii</sup>

Today's gospel lesson<sup>iv</sup> portrays Jesus as healer – not only of a woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years, but also of a 12 year old girl who seemingly has died. Faith in Jesus – in his powerful, unconditional love – saves both the woman and the child. However, they are only saved from physical death for now, since it's inevitable, sooner or later. Yet, they are saved through love forever. Jesus himself goes through a horrific, agonizing death, even though he's mocked by the chief priests, scribes and elders with these words: “He saved others; he cannot save himself...Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.”<sup>v</sup> Jesus uses the first words of Psalm 22 on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>vi</sup> But he knows full well that this psalm later on makes it clear that God hears when one cries out to him, that God is not far when one is in trouble.<sup>vii</sup> Jesus' final words, as he takes his last breath, according to Luke's gospel, are “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”<sup>viii</sup> He's quoting

Psalm 31,<sup>ix</sup> which goes on to say, “I trust in the Lord. I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love.”<sup>x</sup> Death is faced by commending one’s spirit into God’s hands and through exulting and rejoicing in God’s steadfast love. Psalm 30, as John read earlier, conveys the same sense. It begins “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,” and ends “Hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love.”<sup>xi</sup>

Indian-American author Bharati Mukherjee has written a book called *Jasmine*<sup>xii</sup> which has its title character living in the face of death for most of the novel. It helps flesh out this gospel message of progression toward human and divine love in a rather compelling way, I feel, although I’m quite sure that’s not its Hindu author’s primary intent. It begins in an Indian village with a Hindu astrologer telling the seven year old Jasmine that she’ll be widowed and exiled from her country. She responds by shouting at him: “No! You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds!”<sup>xiii</sup>

But sure enough, she marries at 14, and then her husband is killed in a bombing by Sikh terrorists when she’s 16. She decides to go to America, as her husband had been planning for them, and begin a new life there. Widowed and exiled, just as the astrologer had predicted. On the last of her deceased husband’s money, she flies from India to Europe, takes a trawler to the West Indies, and then a shrimp boat to Florida. The captain finds her a room for her first night in America in an abandoned motel. At the door, as she extends her hand in thanks, he forcibly pulls her into the room and then violently rapes her. As Jasmine puts it, “For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about.”<sup>xiv</sup> And she truly experiences life in the face of death, because he demands, “Just you keep it coming...Give me any grief and you’re dead meat.” When he falls asleep at one point, though, she’s able to slit his throat with a small knife she’s been carrying with

her. Leaving his lifeless body on the floor, she exits the motel and on her first full day in America begins walking down a dirt road among tomato fields. She's picked up and rescued by a kindly Quaker woman, Lillian Gordon, who's been helping recently-arrived immigrants. Lillian takes Jasmine home for a week, nurses her back to health, helps her understand American ways and customs, and then buys her a Greyhound bus ticket to New York, where Jasmine knows an Indian family.

Through this Quaker woman, Jasmine experiences unconditional love. Later, Lillian keeps sending Jasmine twenty dollars and hand-knitted slippers each Christmas, as she has for every undocumented alien she's helped get started in America. Eventually, Lillian is arrested and jailed for helping immigrants and refusing to disclose their names and addresses. She gets sick in prison and is released to die at home. As Jasmine puts it, "She represented to me the best in the American experience and the American character."<sup>xv</sup> Lillian spoke about the Good Lord and helped people in need without any questions asked.<sup>xvi</sup> A healer walking in the footsteps of Jesus. Human love mirroring divine love.

In New York, Jasmine becomes a live-in caregiver for the daughter of a Columbia professor and a book editor. She makes good money on the side, too, as a Punjabi tutor for Columbia graduate students and for executives going to India. But then, after two years, she's convinced that a man selling hot dogs near Columbia is the Sikh terrorist who killed her husband, and worse, he's been asking about her. This time Jasmine picks up and leaves for Iowa, and she begins a new life there. India to Florida to New York to Iowa – a now 20 year old woman who's been made well aware, more than once, that she's living in the face of death.

In Iowa Jasmine gets involved with a middle aged banker named Bud. She becomes a teller in his bank, he falls in love with her, they move in together. Then they adopt a fourteen year old Vietnamese refugee whose mother and brother were killed in a refugee camp. The Vietnamese boy, Du, also knows what it's like to live in the face of death, having survived on his own and eaten bugs and worms and rodents.<sup>xvii</sup> He experiences unconditional parental love from Jasmine and Bud and soon is thriving in his new country.

Then, two years later a farmer-debtor of Bud's bank shows up at the front door of his and Jasmine's home two days before Christmas. Jasmine didn't realize it, but she was letting the potential assassin of her current partner into their house just 6 years after her husband had been killed in front of her in India. The man hadn't been able to keep up with his mortgage payments and was at imminent risk of being foreclosed and losing his farm to Bud's bank. He shot Bud and then turned the gun on himself. Luckily Bud wasn't killed, but he was left a paraplegic in a wheelchair for life. Now the whole family was living in the face of death, all with their own very personal, life-changing experiences. As Jasmine puts it, "I used to feel so secure, being alone on the farm with Bud, in the winter; now I feel deserted, except for Du, who rarely talks. New York wasn't like this. Even with the men in stores and on the streets, I felt safe and never alone."<sup>xviii</sup>

Jasmine seems to have become rather confused. She longs for the kind of unconditional love that allows her effectively to live in the face of death. To some extent she gets that from her adoptive son, Du, but soon after he turns 18 he leaves for Los Angeles to live with his sister. Jasmine's tried to be a good partner to Bud, even

managing with difficulty to get pregnant with him after he's shot, but they're not married, and she feels she's only with him now out of duty, not out of true love.

The next part is where many of my students get quite upset with Jasmine. When she was living in New York, the Columbia professor's wife left him for another man. Taylor, the professor, eventually tells Jasmine that he's in love with her. Jasmine finds it hard to admit that she's also head over heels in love with him. Yet, as she puts it, "This was a man I had observed for over two years, who had always been unfailingly kind, never condescending, always proud of my achievements. I would listen."<sup>xi</sup> Eventually, in Iowa, she begins thinking about him, rather than Bud: "If I can come up with the right prayer or appeasement, a letter will come from New York. Taylor will find me somehow, sometime."<sup>xx</sup> Then, sure enough, three and a half years later, a letter arrives from Taylor, saying he's left New York and will be driving through Iowa with his daughter on the way to a new job and life in Berkeley, California: "Don't dare run away again. Love, Taylor."<sup>xxi</sup>

Then the moment she's dreamed of finally arrives. Taylor and his daughter show up in Iowa, and he proposes to her. Jasmine responds, "I can't leave. How can I?" She thinks to herself "I want to do the right thing. I don't mean to be a terrible person." But Taylor keeps telling her "It's a free country." And she's not married after all, just carrying Bud's baby. Jasmine keeps thinking to herself: "I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. A caregiver's life is a good life, a worthy life. What am I to do?"

Then she remembers that she's living in the face of death. "The smell of singed flesh is always with me. Du and I have seen death up close. We've stowed away on

boats...We've seen the worst and survived." So she makes a decision: "Watch me re-position the stars, I whisper to the astrologer... I cry into Taylor's shoulder...cry for all my dead. Then there is nothing I can do." Love wins out over old-world dutifulness, and she heads off with Taylor.

My class split down the middle this spring: Half said she was totally unethical for leaving a man she'd been with almost 4 years, with whom she'd gotten pregnant, and who was now confined to a wheelchair and in need of care. The other half pointed out that they weren't married, that raising a child in a potentially unhappy home versus a happy one raised its own issues, and that she had a long history of being deeply in love with Taylor, interrupted only by her fear of the Sikh terrorist near her apartment in New York. Why not follow her heart to Berkeley? The class asked me what I thought, and I came down on the side of her duties to Bud. Yet, the lesson is still there of love as the way for us to live in the face of death.

Love as the way is also where Tolstoy comes out in his novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.<sup>xxii</sup> His hero has been a successful lawyer who married well and had two attractive children. Then he contracts a terminal illness at the age of 45. He lives in fear of death and in despair until he gets outside of himself in recognition, first, of his love for his son, and then for his whole family. He sees his careerism, his conformity to societal expectations, and his superficial relationships as not "the real thing." What is real and meaningful and quieting in the face of death is deep love, and not just for human beings. Ivan Ilyich has been crying out to God about his apparent cruelty and absence: Why has Thou brought me to this? What have I done to Thee? Why dost Thou torture me so? But in the end, as his son is kissing his hand, Ivan falls through his agony, sees a light,

and grieves for his son and his wife, wanting to deliver them from their pain and suffering over his death. He gets outside of himself and tries to say “forgive me,” but it comes out “forget.” Yet, “too feeble to correct himself, [he] dismissed it, knowing that [God] ... would understand.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Then his accustomed fear of death vanishes, and instead of death there is light. “What bliss!” he exclaims.

For Christians, Jesus is unconditional love incarnate. Jesus is the one who stops to heal and bless a hemorrhaging woman on the way to be with a little girl at the point of death. He knows his psalms: “Hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love.”<sup>xxiv</sup> In the words of the hymn we’re about to sing,<sup>xxv</sup> may we gather in joyful thanksgiving to the creator, and may we know that when we’re bound also to human caring, then we’re truly free. AMEN.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Ronald Blythe, "Introduction" to Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 1.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 19.
- <sup>iv</sup> Mark 5: 21-43.
- <sup>v</sup> Matthew 27: 42; see also Mark 15: 30-32; Luke 23: 37, 39.
- <sup>vi</sup> Matthew 27: 46; Mark 15: 34.
- <sup>vii</sup> Psalm 22: 11, 24.
- <sup>viii</sup> Luke 23: 46.
- <sup>ix</sup> Psalm 31: 5.
- <sup>x</sup> Psalm 31: 6-7.
- <sup>xi</sup> Psalm 130: 1, 7.
- <sup>xii</sup> Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove Press, 1989).
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, p. 30.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, p. 118.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Psalm 130: 1, 7.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Dorothy Caiger Senghas, "We Gather Together," in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #349.