

+ LaDonna Johnson +
Philippians 1:18-23

In the name of + Jesus. Amen.

"If I live, I win; if I die, I win." Those were words oft repeated by LaDonna, and ones that have been on repeat in my head for the last several weeks.

Dear friends and family of LaDonna, Dave and Ros, Michael, Sonja, and Rebecca, LaDonna has won!

Her words echo what you heard from the pen of St. Paul moments ago. "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Paul was being heroic, I guess you could say, given the task before him. He would have preferred to die and gain eternal life, for in Christ, death is but the doorway to eternal life: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." However, remaining "in the flesh," as he put it, would mean fruitful labor, which was more necessary on account of the Philippians (and pretty much the rest of the new Christian world). As he wrote, "Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."

LaDonna's words may seem a little more selfish. She wasn't looking at life and death through the lense of either resuming fruitful labor for the sake of the Kingdom, per se, or being with Christ. Her words were said in the midst of a battle with cancer, to be free of that while continuing to live in this Vale of Tears, or to be free of that in the eternal arms of her Savior. Either way, she would win! However, don't mistake these two people's circumstances for different sentiments, for the same confession of faith undergirds both statements.

Which is better? To go on living as a disciple of Christ on this earth (and all that entails) or to be forever with the Lord? As suits the will of God, to live is Christ and to die is gain. It's a win-win scenario! That is what both Paul and LaDonna confessed in their own words.

To hear words like that helps me to know that I've done a good job. Now, I don't want to take all of the credit because I'm not the only pastor that LaDonna has known; I'm not the only teacher of the faith that she has learned from. Nevertheless, to hear words like that always bring to mind something I was told at seminary. It wasn't said in a classroom setting or even by one of the professors. Before one of our chorus tour services, during the devotion, the chorus director told those of us preparing for the ministry, "Your job as pastor is to teach your people how to die well. If you do that, you will have taught your people how to live well."

Dear friends and family of LaDonna, she has died well. I don't mean to diminish or even ignore her suffering and pain, or even any fear in the process of dying, but that she died in the faith, she died well. In the General Prayer every Sunday, it is prayed that God would "preserve us...from an evil death." In this Valley of Sorrow, one may suppose that suffering in death is evil, that dying because of a horrible illness is evil. These things, suffering and illness and even death, are a result of evil, but it is not what this petition is referring to. An evil death is one that is died without faith in Jesus and trust in His promises. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, death is now the doorway to life eternal, and those who die believing this die well; by the grace of God, they have been preserved from an evil death.

They die well—LaDonna has died well—because of faith in this promise: Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." (John 11:25-26) Though LaDonna has died, because she has died well, yet shall she live. Because she lived and believed in Jesus, she shall never die that evil death, which is eternal separation from God in the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (cf. Matthew 25:41)

So, LaDonna won, just as countless others who have gone before with the sign of faith. You might even say that she ran her race. She ran as one who had been given faith in Christ so as to obtain the prize, an imperishable prize, as St. Paul wrote elsewhere. (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24-25) She ran with perseverance, looking to Jesus who bought and sanctified her in His blood. (cf. Hebrews 12:1-2) By grace through faith, she ran in the joyful hope of the promise of Christ: "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10) And so it is also written, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Revelation 2:11) "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." (Romans 8:38) "[I]n all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Romans 8:37)

Dear friends, it's all about Jesus. Because of Jesus and the work that He has done, LaDonna was born again in the waters of Holy Baptism and lived a life of faith and perseverance. Because of Jesus and the work that He has done, LaDonna died in the assurance of the forgiveness of all of her sins and in the hope of the resurrection of all flesh, and hers specifically to eternal life. Because of Jesus and the work that He has done, LaDonna now rests from all her labors with the crown of life. Because of Jesus and the work that He has done, LaDonna is more than a conqueror. Because of Jesus and the work that He has done, she won!

Dear hearers, these promises are for you, as well. I pray that you have learned and are learning to die well, like our dear friend and sister. The Son of God has taken on your flesh and blood, removed your sin from you, and died with it on the cross. There He shed His blood for your propitiation, making payment for your sin and washing you clean. On the third day, He rose again, defeating death. He is now ascended and seated at the right hand of Majesty. "I am the resurrection and the life," He says. "Do you believe this?" By faith, may your answer be like LaDonna's.

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