

LEARN FOR LIFE BLOG

DO WE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THE “D” WORD?

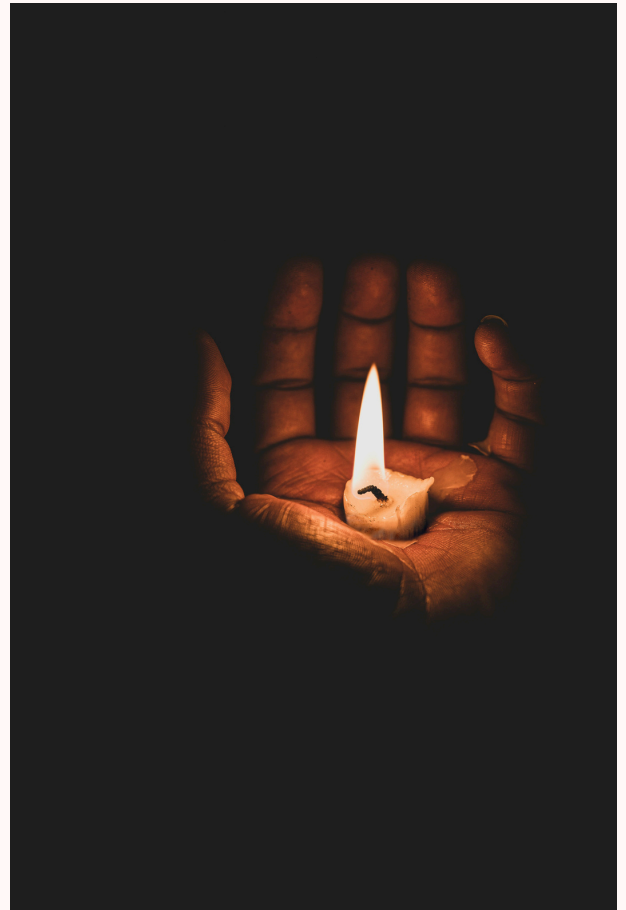
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As Holy Week is here, I believe it's the perfect time to ask a long-overdue question: Does the church, and its people, have a problem with the “d” word? I should be more exact, as it can be argued there are many “d” words with which the church has problems: denomination, discipline, (pre)-destination, devil, tarnation (a more polite version of another d-word), even Deuteronomy. No, I mean the d-word that ends all d-words—as well as all a-c and e-z words: died.

Why has the word “died,” well, frankly, died in public use? I get that there are times when we might jokingly use euphemisms for “died/death/deceased,” especially when referring to a future event or discussing characters in a movie or play. “The doctor said I’m going to kick the bucket if I don’t take better care of my feet.” “In the last scene, before the credits roll, we see the villain pushing up daisies.” “If I play golf on our anniversary, my spouse says I’ll be playing on that great fairway in the sky.”

I also have great empathy for those in-the-moment times when “dead/died” are too gut-punching, and it’s easier to share that a loved one or friend has “gone home” or “gone to a better place.” One morning fifty-two years ago, when my dad had to tell us that my oldest sister was killed in a car wreck, he gathered us around and said, “She’s with God now.” I have no doubt that was the only way he knew to break that news to us until we could process what had happened. But after that morning, until the funeral, and for all the years after, he (and we) would tell people, “She died.”

All this brings me to the euphemism that makes me cringe whenever I hear it in all its various forms. Outside of the death of a hall-of-fame quarterback, I refuse to say that someone has: passed away, passed, or passed on. A few weeks ago, I started a very unscientific research project to see just how often “passed away” and its ilk were used in obituaries, news stories, and social media posts. Upon quickly realizing how burdensome tracking those instances would be, I decided to pass on continuing that research.



But I looked at enough to summarize that more than 50% of social media posts referred to the “passing” of someone. Online news stories regarding celebrities were just as likely to say so and so “passed away” as to say “died.” Traditional newspapers almost always print “died” in either stories or obituaries written by their staff reporters. Online obituaries written by family (or the deceased!) were much less likely to say “died.” However, such obituaries were often more creative in euphemisms other than the “passing trio,” including:

- The Lord went into his garden and picked his handsome flower Thomas.
- He met a condition inconsistent with life.
- Made her last wildly inappropriate and probably sarcastic comment.
- Hung up his pickleball paddle for the last time.
- Assumed a less sophisticated role in the carbon cycle.
- Took his last snort on terra firma.
- Slipped quietly between the sofa cushions.
- Succumbed to Father Time and old age.

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Peculiar side note: While I get that folks often use “passed away” to indicate the deceased has passed on to heaven or the next world, the euphemism is still frequently used in place of “died” for obituaries of individuals who are described as atheists, agnostics, non-spiritual.

You may be wondering, “Gary, why is this stuck in your craw? Why can’t you let the issue rest in peace?” I’ll answer the question I initially asked. Yes, I do think the church has a problem with the “d-word.” Actually, multiple problems. It’s a truth problem. A maturity problem. A statement of faith problem.

When we insist on numbing the sting of death by using euphemisms for “died” we skirt around one of the most basic truths of life. We live, we die. The heart beats, the heart stops beating. The church, of all places, should be capable of talking about death without euphemisms. It’s akin to a medical school referring to the heart as the thumper. The church can help society face its fear of and better understand death through straight-forward talk and dialogue.

I began this “blong” (long-blog, how’s that for a euphemism?!) noting that Holy Week is here. That’s important because a tenant of the Christian faith is that Jesus Christ died for us. He was dead, buried, raised. He didn’t “pass on for our sins.” He DIED for them, for us. Genesis 3:19 says, “For passed on you are and passes will you return.” NO, IT DOESN’T! “For dust you are and dust will you return.” Scripture assures us of the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the body. An oft read scripture at memorial services (a euphemism for funeral?) is 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul writes “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” It loses something in the English when translated, “Where, O passing on, is your success? Where, O passing on, is your comfort?” (And let’s not forget that in our faith tradition, for thousands of years the term pass (on) over has indicated avoidance of death, not a name for it.)

We approach Resurrection Sunday. Would we even celebrate it if on the night of the crucifixion Mary and the others believed Jesus had “passed on” to some other realm and therefore would have no need to bring spices to the tomb? Wouldn’t they have celebrated his passing on instead of grieved his death? Let’s get pass our problem with the d-word!

For a similar take on this, check out this sblog (short-blog): [Do People Die or Do They “Pass Away”? — The Riddleblog.](#) Let us know your thoughts.

