

ASSISTED SUICIDE: AN IDOL AT HEART

When we flee to assisted suicide, even in the name of love
and compassion, we are fleeing from God.

by Dr. James I. Lamb

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“Compassion, that’s what assisted suicide is all about.” So it is said these days.

It sounds reasonable. “Why not put an end to Grandma’s suffering? Wouldn’t she be better off in heaven? What’s so wrong with helping her get there a little sooner?”

When forced to deal with pain and suffering, it is understandable that we sometimes find ourselves thinking that a “little help” getting to heaven would be the most compassionate thing to do.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons why “compassion”—the heart of the matter when it comes to assisted suicide—is catching on so quickly in our country. Physician-assisted suicide is now legal in Oregon, and the first known legally sanctioned assisted suicide in our country took place there on March 25.

“Hooray for the people of Oregon!” said Faye Girsh, executive director of the Hemlock Society, an organization that supports so-called mercy killing. “I’m in awe. This is an historic moment. . . . There will be many others now.”

In fact, as of this writing, at least six other states are actively dealing with this issue in their legislatures.

Those to whom such “compassion” is being extended are not necessarily limited to the terminally ill. As Dr. Jack Kevorkian has said, “Terminal doesn’t matter. Quality of life matters.”

A national organization called Compassion in Dying recently announced plans to expand its mission to make assisted suicide available *beyond* those with terminal disease. Meanwhile, the Hemlock Society, an organization that supports so-called mercy killing, caused a stir with a statement suggesting a need for assisted suicide for people with dementia and chronic diseases. All of this in the name of “compassion.”

As tempting as it is to buy into this lie, the heart of the matter of assisted suicide is not compassion but idolatry. In his *Large Catechism*, Martin Luther asks: “*Does your heart cling to something else, from which it hopes to receive more good and help than from God, and does it flee not to Him but from Him when things go wrong? Then you have an idol, another god.*”

When we flee to assisted suicide, even in the name of compassion, we are fleeing from God to an idol. It is not the absence of suffering we should seek as our god, but the *presence of God* in our suffering.

Christians have a source of comfort and hope in the midst of suffering: the cross of Jesus. When we flee to the cross, we can hear the voice of Jesus say, “Here is the assurance of my love. Here is the assurance of my forgiveness. Here is the assurance that you will never be forsaken.” This comfort is not only for us; it is also for us to speak to others.

In the Hebrew language, one way to express or extend comfort to someone is to “speak to their heart.” The message of the cross speaks to the very heart of the matter of assisted suicide. It reminds people whose hearts are burdened because of pain and suffering that God can and does work powerfully through suffering to accomplish His will. Pastors, hospice workers, parish nurses and others can attest to the blessings they have seen come from suffering—sins confessed, sins forgiven, old wounds healed, new bonds established, priorities reestablished, love strengthened, faith renewed, God’s grace acknowledged.

These and many more form a litany of blessings that God can use for His eternal purposes and for the ultimate good of His people.

The message of the cross speaks comfort to the hearts of those facing difficult end-of-life decisions. It helps them flee from idols offering “compassion” and the “easy way,” to the true God, who Himself chose to express His compassion by way of the cross.

Setting a Scary Standard

The woman in Oregon who was the first publicly reported victim of that state’s new assisted-suicide law, was able to look after her own house, was able to walk up and down stairs, and was not in great pain.

However, she had had breast cancer for 22 years, could no longer garden, and for two weeks had been unable to do aerobic water exercises.

Dr. Peter Goodwin, medical director of Compassion in Dying, the pro-euthanasia group behind the assisted-suicide law, commented, “The quality of her life was just disappearing.”

This is the startling reality of what Oregon has legally sanctioned. If the quality of life disappears when we can no longer garden or do water aerobics, then the Oregon decision has not just put us on a slippery slope, it has propelled us off a steep precipice. There is no telling where we will land.

Thank God that he values human life based not on what we can do or not do, but on what he has done. He creates life. He redeemed life. He sanctifies life. The Christian clings to these truths in and through suffering our hope is not in a prescription for death, but in the Triune God of life.

J.I.L.

If you would like more information on end-of-life issues, Lutherans For Life (LFL) has produced a 3-ring binder with more than 60 items addressing the medical, historical, spiritual, legal and ethical questions arising at life's end. Living with Dying is an easy-to-use, well-organized resource. Call LFL toll free at (888) 364-LIFE.

Also, The President's Commission on the Sanctity of Life offers helpful resources on these issues. That office can be reached at (800) 248-1930, Ext. 1424.—Ed.

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