

Sermon for Shemini Atzeret Yizkor – 16 – Organ Donation and Immortality

Amidst all of the hectic preparation and programming that comes with Sukkot, I had the opportunity to attend a small conference *for clergy* on organ donation at LifeNet Health. LifeNet is one of the leading companies for organ and tissue processing for transplantation. It is a truly amazing non-profit organization and it is one of the hidden gems of our area.

The conference really was amazing – there were about 90 clergy gathered from our area and beyond. Presentations were made by doctors who are leaders in the transplantation field and representatives from organizations like Donate Life Virginia and UNOS, the organization that keeps the national registry of those in need of transplants, better known as The List. That list now stands at 119,956 people waiting for an organ. The vast majority of those are for kidneys, with need for a liver a distant second and a heart at third. 24,891 lifesaving transplants have been performed so far this year from 11,775 donors. Someone is added to that list every ten minutes and sadly, an average of 22 people die every day waiting for a matching organ. One donor can save up to 8 or 9 lives. Needless to say, if you are not a registered organ donor, I hope you will consider it. As I have spoken about before, it is an amazing mitzvah.

The most powerful part of the conference was by far the testimony of the organ recipients and the donor family members. We heard from several of them, including Cindy Harris, who spoke here at one of our Donor Shabbat services, about her son Paul who died in a tragic car accident at age 18 but whose legacy lives on in six different people who are living thanks to Paul's generosity. He'd checked organ donor on his DMV application and his parents didn't even know it, but they were so proud of him. He was the kind of kid who would do good even in his passing.

One of the most powerful speakers was a heart recipient, Reverend James Sheldon from Montana – LifeNet has a center in the Northwest too. He told the story of how he'd lived his whole life with a congenital heart problem. It got worse as he got older and when he would have bad days, which got more and more frequent, it felt like someone was pressing down on his chest with a ten-pound weight and when it got really bad, it felt like the weight was closing his airway too. After three open-heart surgeries, his doctor told him his next option would be a transplant. He was just shy of 60. He sat down his wife and two daughters who were in their later teenage years and told them that he was going to decline to go on the list. These open-heart surgeries are painful he explained, and the recovery is difficult. They'd hear none of it and convinced him to go ahead with it.

Well, shortly after that his heart really started to fail. He ended up in a special facility in Spokane, WA for almost nine months. He could barely move and a bunch of wires and tubes were taking some of the strain off his heart so he could survive. His wife visited from Montana as often as she could, usually once a week, but it was lonely. Then one day his doctor, this big, wonderful Russian man came in and said, "We've got you a heart!" and gave him a big kiss on the forehead. The heart came from a young man who had gotten into an accident. His girlfriend was driving. Nelson was 16 when the accident occurred. Everything went well with the operation and now James has a heart that will probably outlive him.

When you get an organ you are encouraged to write a letter to the donor's family. Sometimes people do and sometimes they don't. Sometimes the families respond and sometimes they don't. Everyone deals with grief and life-changing events differently. Well, about three months after James wrote his letter, he heard from Nelson's family in Seattle. They wanted to meet and so he went to visit them at their home. They were lovely people. They sat and spoke on the porch for a while. He saw pictures of Nelson and learned about who he was. He noticed that Nelson's mom had a tattoo on her arm of an EKG line – that's how she remembered part of Nelson was still here in this world.

Then the parents invited him inside where a few of Nelson's friends were waiting. One of them was the girlfriend who was driving the car. James was stunned. When he got the parents alone again he asked what she was doing there. Aren't they angry with her? They told him accidents happen, and teens will get into wrecks, but Nelson loved her and so we love her. James, this Christian preacher, said he learned more about love and forgiveness and life that day than ever before. When he got home to Montana he had a follow-up appointment where they gave him a printout of his EKG. It looked just like Nelson's mom's tattoo, so on a whim he sent it to her. The next time he visited, it was framed in their living room. Listening to James' and Nelson's story, I learned so much about life and death and legacy and immortality.

But that was only the second most powerful story I heard at the conference. The first was delivered by the conference organizer as the closing remarks. The Faith Leader's Summit was the brainchild of Reverend Dr. Jonathan Barton – the General Minister for VA Council of Churches in Richmond. John has dedicated a huge amount of his volunteer time to Donate Life Virginia. You see, he has two daughters. The younger Katie was born in 1986. In 2003 she was driving and got into a wreck. She was DOA at the hospital, but they revived her. Her brain had been starved of oxygen for too long though and so swelling set in and within a couple of days they knew there was no hope, no brain activity. She was gone. There was a constant vigil from his church and his friends from so many religious communities, because of his role at the council.

It was one week to the day after the accident that Katie died. But to hear John talk about it! Because of Katie, a heart patient is alive. Because of Katie, a kidney patient lives free of dialysis and his life expectancy has increased by decades. She literally gave life to the dying and sight to the blind! John and his wife are so proud of her that she checked the organ donor box at the DMV. She has literally given the most precious gift of life so that others can live! He explained how he and God had a lot to talk about while all this was going on and they still do. "It is not a journey I would have chosen," he says, "but I have found some grace."

So I sat there and I listened to John, so clearly still hurting over the loss of his daughter, but also so clearly finding healing in dedicating his life to what has made her life such a blessing to the 80-plus recipients of her organs and tissues. And I couldn't help but wonder - which is more the key to Katie's ongoing life in this world? The fact that her heart still beats and animates the life of another person or the fact that her father has so thoroughly dedicated his life to living her values and promoting those values in others? I have thought a lot about it over the last few days and I am not sure of the answer. But this is what I have been able to sort out:

We don't have the option of the former – we cannot keep our loved ones hearts beating or their eyes seeing. However, we do have the possibility of keeping their values, their dreams and their priorities impacting this world by living in the way they inspire us and by making their best and most cherished values our own. That is the idea of these Yizkor Memorial prayers that we are about to say – they are a moment for us to reflect on what made those we remember so precious and how we can continue their legacy here on earth just as Jonathan Barton has done with his daughter Katie. Perhaps if we can channel the best of them in our lives the way he has with Katie, we too can be the key to their immortality and we can still feel their presence in our lives, impacting who we are and still influencing the world for good.

And so, as we turn to our Yizkor prayers, let us use it as a time to reflect on exactly how we can not only make our own lives better by bringing their values into how we live, but also fulfill our role as the keepers of their immortality, by living in a way that continues their legacy in this world even though they are in the World to Come.

We turn to the Yizkor prayers in our Yizkor booklets on page 2.