

Last month, I took my mom to a cardiologist to see whether she might be a candidate for a pacemaker. I had spent five minutes on the Internet researching pacemakers, so was an expert on the matter, but asked the doctor to explain to my mother the difference between defibrillators and pacemakers.

“If we put in a defibrillator, one day you’ll be eating a bowl of cereal,” the doctor explained to my mother, “and all of a sudden you’ll have a massive heart attack. Before your face lands in the bowl of cereal, your heart will have been shocked back into beating.”

I don’t know about you, but I think that’s amazing.

My mother asked what a pacemaker would do. The doctor said it would synchronize the chambers in her heart, causing the heart to beat more efficiently, thereby improving the quality of mom’s life, but not adding to its quantity, which seemed wise to me because my mother is experiencing both mental and physical decline.

“So we have here a spiritual issue, not a medical issue,” the doctor told her. “We can keep you alive, but should you be kept alive? You’re 84 years-old and have far exceeded your life expectancy. We can keep you alive, but should we, given your dementia? I can’t answer that for you. You’ll have to decide that for yourself. It is a spiritual decision.”

I love this guy. He's the first doctor to ever raise these considerations with my mother. It broke through the fog of her dementia and she was able to say, "I would like quality, not quantity." So this past week, she had a pacemaker installed.

Then this week, I was chatting with a man about modern healthcare and he said, "The problem today is that doctors think they're God." Just as soon as he said that, I remember my mother's cardiologist saying, "I can keep you alive."

As I considered both events, it occurred to me that we're living in a fascinating time, torn between our long-held belief that God is the one who determines the time and manner of our deaths, and the emerging realization that we now have the power, because of advances in science and medicine, we now have the power to determine the time and manner of our death. Perhaps not always, but increasingly so. When a device can be implanted in the human body that can cause a dead heart to beat again, when a doctor can say, "We can keep you alive.", when we live in that kind of world, we can no longer say it is up to God when we die. We have taken that decision from God's hands and placed it squarely in our own hands.

We've been talking about the stages of life. Thank you for hanging in there through this series. It's the longest series I've ever preached, and it probably feels that way to you. Today, I want to talk about the end of life, and next Sunday I want us to think about the after-life. I can't possibly conceive of anything after the after-life, so we'll wind things down there.

I was watching a documentary this week about a remote tribe in South America whose culture is based on honey. The men climb trees hundreds of feet high to get honey for their families, and also trade the honey with other tribes to get what they need. Honey is their currency. There isn't one member of that tribe with a pacemaker or defibrillator. They have no hospital, no access to modern medical care, no doctor to set their bones when they fall from trees and break their bones. Sociologically speaking, they're a very primitive culture. Lacking the advantages of scientific progress, they attribute to God and other unseen forces all the things that happen to them. If they die, it's because God decided it was their time to die.

We are as different from them as night is from day. Were they to be lifted out of the rain forest, placed on Monument Circle, and ordered to earn a living, they would be psychologically overwhelmed and unable to function, just as we would be similarly overcome if we were placed in the rain forest and ordered to provide for ourselves and our families. We'd be bitten by a snake and dead within days. Geez, I hate snakes.

But if the members of the tribe and the members of our modern society were placed in a room and asked, “How and when will you die?”, most of us would say, “That’s up to God.” Even though we have created a society in which the time and type of death we have is clearly no longer up to God, but more and more up to us. And if the time and type of death is up to us, then we must begin to ask ourselves certain questions. Questions like: How do I want to die? What resources am I willing to have spent to keep me alive? Is there a kind of life that is worse than death?

Then of course, there’s the big question behind all these other questions. This is the question Henry David Thoreau raised when he wrote, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

Wouldn’t that be terrible? To face our death, and realize we had not lived. Realize we had not known deep joy and spontaneity. Realize we had not appreciated Earth’s beauty. Realize we had not loved or been loved. Realized we had not risked. Realized we had settled for so little when life offered so much. Realized we had lived so much in the past and worried so much about the future, we had no time left to savor the present, to relish and enjoy the now.

Now, those are the great spiritual questions we face. And those matters are up to us and no one else. Those are the questions and issues we must face at every stage of life.

We were talking with our son Sam the other day on the phone. He was telling us that when he gets out of the army, he wants to finish college, become a physician's assistant, then join the Peace Corps.

When he said that, I thought to myself, "At some point, he will have to settle down and build a life for himself."

Isn't that crazy?

Here's this young man who is having all these wonderful experiences, having all these wonderful dreams, deeply engaging and loving life, and I want him to go get a mortgage and mow the yard.

What if we died, only to discover we had not lived? Face your death. Give careful thought to how you wish to die. But first make sure you live. Not in the past. Not in the future. But in the now.