

Terry Schiavo, Instrument of God

She wouldn't want to live this way.

As I write this article, Terry Schiavo has been deprived of food and water for five days, and it does not appear that she has much time left. The Schiavo story has become as complex as it is upsetting, with all sorts of court rulings, speculation, and a variety of transparent arguments as to why “withholding nutrition and hydration” doesn't equal “starving someone to death.” While much of this deserves attention, I want to focus on one argument that is central to the matter: it is her husband's claim that she should [“be allowed to”] die because she wouldn't want to live this way.

Even on conservative talk radio, this seems to be the determining factor. Many object that there is only the husband's word about Terry's wishes, and that isn't good enough. However, many pundits have offered that, if it could be proven that Terry Schiavo doesn't want to live this way, then her wishes should be followed.

I'll be honest: I wouldn't want to live that way, either. I don't see her as an icon for political points, but as a deeply injured human being. I have no intention of trivializing the suffering she has endured. If it were my choice, I'd much rather be dead and delivered.

But here is the question: is it my choice? It is Terry Schiavo's choice? Is it given to man to say, “When I decide the quality of my life has dropped below a certain point, I have the right end my life”? Is it permitted by God for you or me to say, “Since I don't want to live this way, I can stop living”?

Such an idea is not found in Scripture. Instead, St. Paul proclaims, “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's” (I Cor. 6:19-20).

You are not your own. You were enslaved, but you have been redeemed. You were dead, but you have been made alive. You are not your own, but the Lord's; and it is His privilege to use you and me as He sees fit.

Even if we are incapacitated? Yes, even then. Martin Luther noted that the Lord uses us as His instruments until the day of our death. Sometimes, He uses us as active instruments, caring for others. Sometimes, He uses us as His passive instruments, teaching others to serve by caring for us. To be a passive instrument is a frustrating vocation, because we believe that we are only useful when we are active; but no matter our condition, the Lord grants us the dignity of being His servants. How is it possible that a brain-damaged woman would lead this entire pleasure-crazed, death-denying nation to discuss the dignity of life for several weeks? It is possible because the Lord is at work. Terry Schiavo, instrument of God to call a people to repentance.

We note as well that the climax of Jesus' redemptive work was not His active ministry, but His *passive* suffering. We witness scourge and cross and say most honestly, “I wouldn't want to live that way, and I wouldn't want to die that way.” Neither did He, and so He prayed in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39). Yet, He endured the cross and scorned its shame (Heb. 12:2) for the joy set before Him—the joy of forgiving your sins and raising you up to everlasting life.

I am not blind. I understand that there is a time when Christians must make decisions about treatment during terminal illness or injury. As a pastor, I've been party to a few of these discussions, and they are excruciating; they can be no other way in this dying world. But the Christian does not approach these questions asking, “When is my life no longer worth living?” The Christian approaches these decisions asking things like, “My life is not my own, for I have been bought with a price. Does this decision honor God and His gift of life?”

Nor am I brave. I don't *want* to live like Terry Schiavo. But we have the Lord's promise that He provides sufficient grace to keep us faithful in suffering. And we have the Lord's promise that the suffering is not the end: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Ro. 8:18). St. Paul doesn't write that to trivialize the suffering, but to make known how glorious the eternal life that awaits us for the sake of Christ.

That life is yours, because you are not your own. You are His, bought with the price of His own cross. For this, we offer our humble thanks to God for the joy of eternal life which He has set before us.

Indeed, Lord, come quickly.

—Pastor Pauls

