I found the poem “Conscientious Objector” by Edna St. Vincent Millay to be very insightful and moving. It touches upon the topic that all of us will experience, albeit only once in our lifetime, namely, death. Death has been called “the great equalizer” since it treats all people the same – it recognizes no class, age, gender or racial distinction. It is the common experience of all humanity, and so ties us all together in its life-ending insatiable swallowing down humankind. Millay says it is possible to be a Conscientious Objector in death’s war on humanity – we each can die, but never hand over anyone – friend or enemy – to death.

**Conscientious Objector**

by Edna St. Vincent Millay

*I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death.*

*I hear him leading his horse out of the stall; I hear the clatter on the barn-floor.*

*He is in haste; he has business in Cuba, business in the Balkans, many calls to make this morning.*

*But I will not hold the bridle while he cinches the girth.*

*And he may mount by himself: I will not give him a leg up.*

*Though he flick my shoulders with his whip, I will not tell him which way the fox ran.*

*With his hoof on my breast, I will not tell him where the black boy hides in the swamp.*
I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death; I am not on his pay-roll.

I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends nor of my enemies either. Though he promise me much, I will not map him the route to any man’s door.

Am I a spy in the land of the living, that I should deliver men to Death?
Brother, the password and the plans of our city are safe with me; never through me shall you be overcome.

Millay’s poem made me think about death as portrayed in and understood by the Bible. On the one hand God warned Adam that should he disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, that Adam would surely die. On the other hand, God commanded that humans should not kill (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17), that murderers should be punished by death (Genesis 9:6), and that God Himself had no desire to see anyone, including sinners die (Ezekiel 18:32, 33:11).

Can I live as Millay suggests, as a Conscientious Objector to death? Can I live so that I never betray anyone – friend or enemy – to death, rather always seeing death as the true enemy of humanity?

Whatever role death might have played in dealing with rebellious and sinful humanity, St. Paul does categorize death as an enemy, not a tool of God:

“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:26)
That death is neither God’s friend, nor invention is made clear in the Septuagint which was canonical Jewish thinking at the time of St. Paul:

“Do not invite death by the error of your life, or bring on destruction by the works of your hands; because God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them, and the dominion of Hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal. But the ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death; considering him a friend, they pined away and made a covenant with him, because they are fit to belong to his company.” [Wisdom of Solomon 1:12-16 (NRSV)]

Death is summoned when humans sin, but does not belong to the Will of God for humanity. God’s will is always geared toward humanity’s eternal salvation.

So, can I live so committed to a pro-life attitude that I never betray any fellow human being to death? Would not that be respecting the sanctity of human life?

**Some Scriptural Thoughts on Death (A)**

God warned Adam that should he disobey God’s command not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, he would die (Genesis 2:17). This was a warning from God, for Adam’s own good, not a punishment. What would make me think so? We can look at God’s attitude toward death in several other Biblical passages.

“Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? ... For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.” (Ezekiel 18:23 ... 32)

"And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: ‘Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?’ Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the
wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:10-11)

God could not make it any more clear, that death is not what God hopes for anyone and He finds death to be unacceptable to Him, but He still recognizes it as a human choice. And in the New Testament, death is described as the last enemy of God.

“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:26)

In fact the Good News of God’s Kingdom is that death is being overthrown and no longer has dominion over humanity. Additionally, in what is a transfiguration of death’s origins, God comes to value His servants who die.

“Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.” (Psalms 116:15)

Here we have in the Psalms a prophecy which will see its fulfillment in the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ. For when God allowed the first Adam to die because of his disobedient sin of eating of the forbidden fruit, God the Father already knew what this meant for His Son, the new Adam. God intended for humans to share in the divine life, but God was willing to share in the human life to make it possible for humans to attain full communion with Him. Thus death which was the direct result of human sin against God, became part of what God would experience to save humanity from its fallen state and to lift humanity to heaven. This is God’s plan of salvation.

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” [Philippians 2:5-11 (RSV)]

Unlike the first Adam – in fact, the exact opposite of the first Adam – who was disobedient unto death, Jesus Christ, the new Adam, is obedient unto death. The first Adam disobeyed in sin to bring death into the world, Christ the new Adam obeys God and dies in order to give life to the world.
“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.” (Hebrews 2:14-15)

How was it that humans created in God’s image and likeness, created to have dominion over the rest of creation, become subject to death? How did it happen that all of humanity, created to share in the eternal divine life, became mortal?

“Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned— sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.” (Romans 5:12-14)

It was human sin that brought death to humanity. The first Adam sinned as did all his descendants until the time of Christ. Torah given by God for humanity, did not stop sin or death.

The incarnation of the Word of God (John 1:1-14) was God’s plan for taking on death. The Word became flesh in order to die in the flesh with the purpose of destroying death.

(see also my Blogs: Why did God become Human? and Job: My redeemer lives!)
Some Scriptural Thoughts on Death (B)

When God warned Adam that should he sin and eat the forbidden fruit that he would die, God the Father knew also that it would mean the death of His unbegotten and eternal Son. This might give us the clearest picture that death was not God’s intention for humanity, but rather something which humans brought into creation through their own rebellious sinfulness.

“Do not invite death by the error of your life, or bring on destruction by the works of your hands; because God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them, and the dominion of Hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal. But the ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death; considering him a friend, they pined away and made a covenant with him, because they are fit to belong to his company.” [Wisdom of Solomon 1:12-16 (NRSV)]

That death is the final enemy of God and that God worked to destroy death is the Gospel. We can see God’s own attitude toward death in the New Testament. One need only read John 11, the raising of Lazarus, to see Christ’s own reaction to death – both weeping because of it, and then overcoming it. Ultimately it is Christ, not only in His own death and resurrection, who destroys the power of death, but also in His very person, for being the incarnate Son of God, He is life giving and thus the very enemy of death. Here are three passages from St. Paul on this topic:

“... our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (2 Timothy 1:10)
“For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.” (Romans 6:9)

“Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” [1 Corinthians 15:51-57 (RSV)]

Christ came to destroy and abolish death. Death is the enemy of humanity and of God. In the book of Revelation, it is Christ, not Satan who ultimately holds the keys of death and Hades. “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Revelation 1:17-18). And when God’s Kingdom is established, death is completely overthrown and is shown to be a temporary condition. It’s powers were limited by space and time and thus get swallowed up in God’s eternal victory.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. ... Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ... and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” [Revelation 20:12-14, 21:1-4 (RSV)]

This power over death Christ offers to His followers in this world through the Church.
“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)

All of these words against death are the witness of the Gospel regarding God’s own attitude about mortality. Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem **CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR** brought all of this to mind. Being pro-life is in line with the Gospel, and thus on one level is easy for Christians to embrace. Millay’s poem suggest that we should never willingly betray any human to death – not through murder, war, capital punishment, abortion, neglect, greed, hatred or any intention. Jesus standing at the tomb of Lazarus, confronted by death, weeps for His friend, weeps for humanity. Then calls His friend to life, showing His power over death, revealing the temporary nature of death itself. We are back to the first day of creation, when all things were new and life unending.

**Three Patristic Saints on Death**

It is clear in Scripture that death is God’s enemy. The Scriptures witness that God finds no pleasure in the death of anyone, and that in fact death was invited into human life through human sin. What is this “death” which humans dread, yet readily visit on their enemies real and imagined? **St. Gregory Palamas** (d. 1359AD) describes death in these terms:

“As the separation of the soul from the body is the death of the body, so the separation of God from the soul is the death of the soul. And this death of the soul is the true death. This is made clear by the commandment given in paradise, when God said to Adam,
‘On whatever day you eat from the forbidden tree you will certainly die’ (cf. Gen. 2:17). And it was indeed Adam’s soul that died by becoming through his transgression separated from God; for bodily he continued to live after that time, even for nine hundred and thirty years (cf. Gen. 5:5). The death, however, that befell the soul because of the transgression not only crippled the soul and made man accursed; it also rendered the body itself subject to fatigue, suffering and corruptibility, and finally handed it over to death. For it was after the dying of his inner self brought about by the transgression that the earthly Adam heard the words, ‘Earth will be cursed because of what you do, it will produce thorns and thistles for you; through the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread until you return to the earth from which you were taken: for you are earth, and to earth you will return’ (Gen. 3:17-19, LXX). … Thus the violation of God’s commandment is the cause of all types of death, both of soul and body, whether in the present life or in that endless chastisement. And death, properly speaking, is this: for the soul to be unharnessed from divine grace and to be yoked to sin. This death, for those who have their wits, is truly dreadful and something to be avoided. This, for those who think aright, is more terrible than the chastisement of Gehenna. From this let us also flee with all our might. Let us cast away, let us reject all things, bid farewell to all things: to all relationships, actions and intentions that drag us downward, separate us from God and produce such death. He who is frightened of this death and has preserved himself from it will not be alarmed by the oncoming death of the body, for in him the true life dwells, and bodily death, so far from taking true life away, renders it inalienable. As the death of the soul is authentic death, so the life of the soul is authentic life. Life of the soul is union with God, as life of the body is its union with the soul.” (St. Gregory Palamas in THE PHILOKALIA v. 4, pp 296-297).

The death of the soul, according to Palamas is worse than going to the everlasting punishment of hell! The death of the soul is what every believing person should strive to avoid. Death is not God’s plan for humanity. It is to be destroyed by God, and that destruction began in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

One thousand years before St. Gregory Palamas wrote his description of death, St. Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca 384 AD) also commented on the entrance of death into the human condition.

“And so man separated himself from the fruit of all good things, and by his disobedience he was filled with the fruit that brings destruction. And the name of that fruit
was mortal sin. *Straightway he died to the more perfect life: he passed from a divine life to one on the level with irrational beasts. Once death was mingled with his nature, mortality was passed on to all generations of his children. Hence we are born into a life of death, for, in a certain sense, our very life has died. Our life is indeed dead because we have been deprived of immortality. But the man who is aware that he lives in the midst of two lives can cross the barrier between them, such that by destroying the one he can give the victory to the other. Man by his death to the true life entered into this life of death. So too, when he dies to this irrational life of death, he is restored to life eternal. And so there is no doubt but that we cannot enter into this life of blessedness unless we die to sin.* (St. Gregory of Nyssa, FROM GLORY TO GLORY, p 259)

St. Gregory of Nyssa comments on what he believes to be a transformation of physical death. In his thinking it is necessary for humans to pass through death in order to rid ourselves of the mortality that has become part of the human condition. We cannot enter into the blessed eternal life until we have died to sin – which is not possible until we have left this world. Thus death in his thinking has become a purifying process – it rids us of our life of sin. St. Basil the Great (d. 379AD), Gregory of Nyssa’s older brother, also writes about death in this more positive light. Referring to the death of a fellow Christian, he says:

“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away’ (Job 1:21). As the Lord thought good so it came to pass. Let us adopt those marvelous words. At the hands of the righteous Judge, they who show like good deeds shall receive a like reward. We have not lost a fellow Christian; we have restored him to the Lender. His life is not destroyed; it is changed for the better. He whom we love is not hidden in the ground; he is received into heaven. Let us wait a little while, and we shall be once more with him. The time of our separation is not long, for in this life we are all like travelers on a journey, hastening on to the same shelter. While one has reached his rest another arrives, another hurries on but one and the same end awaits them all.” (St. Basil the Great quoted in THROUGH THE YEAR WITH THE CHURCH FATHERS, p 166)

Death for these saints is a temporary state, like sleep, from which we shall be awakened by the sweet voice of the Savior.
(of possible interest – a blog series on Hell)