

- The third reading is from the Gospel According to St. John, chapter 12. Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had risen from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, the one who was about to betray him, said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii "and the money given to the poor?" He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. He kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it. Jesus said, Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me. This is the word of the Lord.

- Praise be to God.

- I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like Him in death. I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own. We are following Jesus down a lonely road toward death. Jesus did not want to die. In Gethsemane He prayed, let this cup, this cup of death pass from me. Jesus did not want to suffer. Who does? And yet He went to the cross, not because it wouldn't hurt, and not because He had some romantic desire to die heroically, but rather He went because in Jesus' words, not my will, but Thine be done. Jesus vividly displayed that His life was not His own. His life was owned by God, caught up in the purposes of God, commandeered. In Genesis 2:18, it says that we are here because we were created to be social creatures. It is not good for humans to be alone. That was the thought that first put us in God's mind. We are created for community. Our lives are not our own but they are interconnected to the larger purposes of God. Wandering in a cemetery in a small southern town, I read a tombstone to some departed local hero, and in large letters it said on the tombstone, he was a self-made man. What a curious, arrogant designation for a person. Self-made. This is the error underlying liberal democracy. The notion that we are self-made, that we are autonomous, self-sufficient. But who here today is somehow detached from a web of relationships, standing alone? Self-made. If you are, I feel sad for you. Createo ex nihilo. Created out of nothing. This term can never apply to human beings. The modern notion that I am the creator of me is a terrible fiction. Which means at its core, I am alone. I am therefore free. Free to do as I please. No wonder in such a society everybody seems a stranger, a competitor. The Supreme Court justifies abortion on the basis of right to privacy. The destruction of a fetus based upon my right to be by my self? But what else could the Supreme Court do? We have no higher value, it appears, in life, in death, than privacy. The right in the words of Justice Brandeis, the right to be left alone. Thus the court has forged a nice link between privacy and death. The fetus, being utterly dependent, is sub-human, for humanity by our definition consists in being utterly independent, autonomous, self-sufficient, standing alone. Was it a surprise that next down the slippery slope slid physician-assisted suicide? Upheld by the 9th court of appeals as guarantee of personal liberty. The Supreme Court unanimously reversed the lower court this past June, though I wonder why. The reasoning might be that suicide is legal and permissible, but only as long as you can demonstrate that it is done absolutely alone, without assistance from a doctor or a friend

or anybody. But does anybody live or die alone? Aristotle condemned suicide as an injustice against the state, but that was because, for Aristotle, there is no higher good in life than the state. Citizens, Aristotle argued, have no right to deprive the state of themselves. Aristotle did believe that we are created as social by nature, created for community, born to a web of claims from others laid upon us. Aristotle did believe that we are in the world for a reason greater than ourselves. But maybe it's not this the human meaning of death. Maybe this is why we so justly avoid and fear death. Because death is the ultimate loneliness. That time when we at last get what this society and Supreme Court tells us what we're to want. To be left alone. Death is ultimate abandonment. We get a foretaste of death in those moments when we are in despair and dereliction and gloom. When we cry out as did Job, my kin have abandoned me, my fellows forgotten me. Jesus quoted Psalm 22 on the cross. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? In choosing death, in suicide, it's like we attempt a pre-emptive strike on death. Attempting to take these matters in our own hands. Maybe it won't hurt as much if it's something we decide. We therefore wish to die as we live. Alone, autonomous, since we believe the essence of humanity is self-sufficiency. Oh, we call this death with dignity. That is, death where we call all the shots. Where we make the choice of killing ourselves. Which, when you think about it, is an odd definition of freedom. Duke's Kathy Rudy complains, The government now tells women, congratulations, you're free, and as a sign of that we're going to let you destroy your fetus to prove that you're free. She asks, this is freedom? Whereas formerly, death was that ultimately reminder that our lives are not our own to do with as we please. A final word that we are not in control over the significance of ourselves. Now death is transformed into some great fantasy. That, hey, this is my life and I can destroy it as I damned well please. Of course, nobody advocates physician-assisted suicide, except for those who are now said to be terminal, which I guess means everybody here this morning. If we're all on our way to death, and if death is the ultimate loss of control, therefore the ultimate loss of human significance and dignity since control is everything, then why not terminate life at any moment in life? In his classic study Suicide, Emile Durkheim asks, why is it that suicide rates are always highest in modern, affluent, industrial societies? Durkheim's answer was sociological, that sense of anomie, that sense of being disconnected from others not part of any web of relationships, that sense of loneliness that we feel when we are no more to this world than expendable producers and expendable consumers. And is not this the rational behind many legitimations of assisted suicide? She is no longer living a productive life. And in this economy when somebody can no longer either produce or consume then why should they live? Comedian Dennis Miller recently referred to suicide as merely thinning the herd. I've noted as a pastor that the greatest fear most people have of aging is not that they're moving closer to death, but rather in their aging they are at a greater risk of dependency. I don't want to be dependent on my children, they say. Isn't it revealing that we fear dependency, the need to reach out to the care and concern of other people, that we fear that even more than we fear death? Admittedly in this society, there's real good reason to wonder if when our time comes as it will do to most of us, to be dramatically dependent upon others if there will be anybody there to care. Why was I not surprised that an editorial in the Duke Chronicle praised Dr. Kevorkian as a national hero. I for one, by the way, want to go on the record as saying when I become dependent and incapacitated and needy, please do not put me at the fate of the editorial board of the Duke Chronicle. (congregation laughs) Don't you worry about a society that tells us in those gloomy moments in life when we are tempted towards self-destruction, hey, you're on your own. It's in these dark nights when we are least self-sufficient. When we are most vulnerable and least able to choose and to decide, it's in those moments that we most desperately need the love and concern of others. This past week a couple of kids in Arkansas have reminded us of the

words of Dr. Martin Luther King, words that he spoke just two months before his own death in saying we may live in the most violently and death-dealing culture in the world. We live in a violent society that's got this thing about death. We need others to overcome our naturally self-destructive tendencies. I remind you it was the first youthful murderer, Cain, who asked, am I my brother's keeper? God, have I been put in this world somehow to be connected to other people? To have some kind of responsibility for their lives? As Christians, we believe the answer to that is yes. We have been charged by God to love and to care for human life, especially the most vulnerable human life. In a society where productivity and consumption are elevated as the supreme human virtues, those who are labeled non-productive, those who are labeled dependent, needy. They deserve our special attention because they're the ones most likely to be disposed of in a society like ours, because they live as visible, truthful reminders that this society lies. One reason it's so hard to visit people who are in pain one reason that there's so few cars in the visitor's lot at the parking lot of the nursing home is people who are dependent and needy and in pain are visible reminders of who I really am. And we can't stand the truth. We ought to intervene when any of our sisters or brothers is tempted toward suicide. If you've got a friend who speaks of hurting himself or herself, you need to intervene. You need to reach out and get help. Because in their unique, God-give humanity, they are valuable. It takes guts in a feel-good society like ours, to be depressed. It takes courage in those dark moments to admit to how flat and meaningless life can become, and people who face that darkness are a threat to the rest of us. In all the more need they should be cherished and loved deeply. And they ought not prematurely to deprive us of their presence by taking their own lives. You ask, is it fair to ask some terribly suffering person to go on living? Life is suffering in different kind and degree. And by the way, I say that as a terribly impatient patient. A terrible bearer of pain. And yet, when it becomes my lot to suffer, the Christian Gospel bids me to see my suffering as opportunity to witness to others that life is a gift of God worth living. As long as God gives life. That even in pain, there is reason to go on. A person who endures terrible pain and suffering is not disposable and unwanted. Indeed, in this society, such a person becomes a prophet of the truth. Testifying to the rest of us that the goal of life is not hedonistic pleasure and comfort, but courage, love, endurance, patience in the confidence that God gives life, that God owns life and that only God can take life. I can only testify that from seriously incapacitated, sick people I have been given virtues I would not have had had God not given them to me. I've been taught patience, a difficult virtue. I've been taught joy in the tiny little things of life and simple courage. The bravery and perseverance of those who are seriously ill threatens the rest of who are made to wonder if when we are called to suffer, we will have the sort of souls that are enable to do something with our suffering. That we will have the spiritual and intellectual resources to go on. It is tragic that many who are near the end of life are considered burdens, obstacles to our self-fulfillment and are thus made to feel unwanted, unloved, made to feel as if they now have responsibility to take matters in hand and become their own executioners. I remember the day when it used to be bad enough to be suffering from a terminal illness. Now things have come to a point where not only do you have to suffer, but you're made to feel as if you owe it to your family, you owe it to the national debt, and our problems with funding social security, to go ahead, take your own life, and stop being a drain on national resources. And that's sick. In extremis. Which maybe not where I am today but where a lot of my sisters and brothers are. In extremis. My best prayer is one of the last prayers Jesus ever prayed. It is a prayer the Church tries to get me to learn by heart in the bright days of life so in the darker, more difficult days I may be able to say it on my own. The prayer which Jesus prayed. Not my will, but Thine be done. That is our last, best prayer.