

## **DONOR SABBATH SUNDAY**

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The same message you are hearing is being heard throughout houses of worship across our nation today. November is National Donor Sabbath month, a time for religious congregations to reflect on the lifesaving importance of organ and tissue donation and how it touches those in our communities. Each November, clergy, healthcare professionals, and members of the organ donation and transplantation community across the country celebrate National Donor Sabbath—an annual observance to raise awareness of the urgent need for organ and tissue donation among religious communities. National Donor Sabbath, a program endorsed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is held every November two weekends before Thanksgiving weekend. In this season of giving, one of the most profound ways to give is through the Gift of Life. The motto for the Donate Life organization is Give thanks, Give life.

Today I ask you to take part in this observance by supporting members of our congregation to make faith-based decisions to consider becoming organ and tissue donors. One in twenty Americans will need some type of medical tissue transplant during their life time. 18 men, women, and children die each day in the U.S. because the necessary organs were not available to meet the need and every 10 minutes another person is added to the national waiting list for organ donation. A single donor can save the lives of up to nine people and heal up to 50 more by donating vital organs such as the heart, two lungs, two kidneys, liver, pancreas and small bowel and tissue such as the corneas, bone, fascia, skin, veins, nerves, tendons, ligaments and heart valves, which save the lives of many infants. Living donation is when a living person donates an organ or part of an organ to another person. The living donor may be a relative, friend, spouse or an in-law. Or, the donor may be a stranger that has volunteered to help someone else. Living donation usually involves a segment of the liver, the lobe of one lung, a kidney, or a portion of the pancreas and intestines. Living donation is an alternative for individuals awaiting organ transplantation from a deceased donor.

Last year approximately 28,000 Americans received a life-saving organ transplant and more than one million Americans received a life-changing tissue transplant. Donation saves lives every day. Hundreds of Virginians have organ transplants each year and receive a second chance at life. Approximately three citizens in the Commonwealth die every week waiting for the gift of an organ that does not come. With more than 112,111 men, women and children across the country waiting for the gift of life—and thousands more waiting for life-enhancing tissue or cornea transplants—I hope you will join me in spreading the message that, by giving of

ourselves through organ and tissue donation, we give the gift of life that Jesus gave to us.

Organ and tissue donation represents one of the highest forms of compassion and giving. These are basic principles upon which all religions are based. When considering organ/tissue donation, people often ask: "Does my religion approve of organ and tissue donation?" In fact, a Gallup poll showed that less than 10 percent of people in the United States are aware that their religious groups have doctrines regarding donation.

Specific beliefs differ from denomination to denomination, but the vast majority of religions support organ and tissue donation as one of the highest expressions of compassion and generosity. Other religions support an individual's personal decision about donating organs and tissues. The 70th General Convention of the Episcopal Church recommends and urges "all members of this Church to consider seriously the opportunity to donate organs after death that others may live, and that such decisions be clearly stated to family, friends, church and attorney."

For many, the chance to live a full life won't come unless all of us consider how we can help give life after death. The decision to donate is a personal, individual commitment that should be shared with family members, loved ones and specifically spelled out in an advanced directive or living will. These conversations may be difficult to initiate, however there is added and undue stress when these discussions take place in intensive care units and emergency departments under conditions of emergent situations when death is imminent and next of kin must make assumptions on what decisions their relatives would make for themselves. I urge you to have that conversation with your family members, maybe during Thanksgiving dinner as we all give thanks for our blessings and abundance. Its okay to ask what someone may want, when they are no longer able to speak for themselves. For a grieving family, the decision to donate organs has brought some meaning and purpose to an otherwise senseless death.

In my Sunday School class this morning with middle school and high school aged teens, all five of them agreed when asked that they would like to be organ donors and the oldest of them already had it noted on his driving permit. Teens are much more open to the idea of organ donation, in the event of their untimely death, than parents may be comfortable discussing with them due to the emotions involved with those presumptions.

Other myths regarding organ donation that I would like to dispel at this time include limitations regarding age, funeral arrangements, cost, and concern for receiving less than desired medical care to save your life so you can donate your organs. The oldest donor I have found documented was 102 at the time of his death. Your health at the time of your death determines your ability to donate, not your actual age. Open casket funerals are still an option after organ donation as the integrity of the body is maintained while donation is accomplished. The cost of donation is paid for

by the recipient's insurance and there is no cost to the donor or their family. As for sub-optimal medical care, even my own husband once thought that heroic efforts would not be made to save your life if you were known to be an organ donor, he now understands differently and realizes that your medical care options are not directed by your choice to be an organ donor and until the time you are legally dead, all efforts are toward saving your life.

There are scriptural references to organ donation, the first noted in Genesis when a rib was taken from Adam to give life to Eve. In Revelations it is noted that in Eternity we will not need our earthly bodies: "Former things will pass away, all things will be made new." Today's Gospel lesson is the Parable of the Talents. It has taken a while for the true meaning of this parable to become clear for me. This parable is not primarily about faith, nor is it about being willing to take a risk. One problem in understanding this parable is that talent is also an English word meaning a skill or ability. But in the Greek language a talent was a unit of measure, often defining an amount of money. Since everything in a parable is symbolic of something else, to think of the talents as symbolizing either skills or money are wrong, and really distort the message of the parable. Instead, think of the talent as symbolizing something of great value to the Lord; something that belonged to Him, and that He entrusted to His servants while He was away. You can see that neither skills nor money correctly define the symbolic talents.

Follow the parable. He will have been gone for a long time and will have just come back. He will have left some valuable property of His in the care of various servants, and some will have multiplied their share while others will have buried theirs. He is now requiring an accounting of them that will determine their destiny. What property of His is symbolized by the talents?

In Isaiah and Matthew, we are told that His word, once invested, will always bring a return. It is His most valued possession, He left it with us, and He expects us to invest it. The only reference point for truth will be His Word, and many of those with whom it has been entrusted will have rendered it so meaningless as to be buried. So the talents represent His Word, the Gospel of our Salvation. Those who sow it liberally into the hearts of their listeners find it multiplies. Where there were five, ten now appear. Where there were two, now there are four. Those who bury it and pay no attention find its value diminishes the longer they ignore it. Finally even what little they had is taken from them.

I have been taught from the time I was a child that His Word was Love. To love your neighbor as yourself, love one another as God has loved you and to do unto others as you would have done unto you. My experiences along the journey of organ donation and transplantation have demonstrated that love and kindred spirit. In my professional life as a renal transplant coordinator at Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters, I have witnessed the absolute miracle of removing a kidney from an adult in one operating room and walking through hallways to deliver the organ and watch it be placed into a child who has lived with end stage renal disease and

been dependent on dialysis for years. I have witnessed family members meeting the recipients of their loved one's donated organs and seen bonds formed by the selfless act of giving that cannot be described. The mother of one donor asked the recipient if she could put her hand on his chest and feel her daughter's lungs breathing, quite an emotional scene.

On a personal note, there are at least 6 families in our St. Aidan's congregation that have been directly affected by organ and tissue transplantation and there are likely others. Ask them about the value of organ donation and your view may be forever changed as well. I am blessed to live with the immeasurable gift of a second chance at life for my 8 year old daughter every day. We celebrate Sabrina's birthday every year in February, but we celebrate her transplant anniversary each year in October. We can all see the life and bounding energy that transplant has given her. I have also felt the heartache and devastation of a family whose child did not receive their lifesaving organ in time. Every day, I remember an angel. A precious baby boy, named Sunari who died 10 days before his first birthday because there wasn't a liver available for him.

This is not like cancer or diabetes, where we don't have a cure. This is simply a matter of numbers, more needed than available. If everyone made the decision to donate their organs, no one would die waiting for an organ. While more than 95 percent of American adults approve of donation as a viable, life-giving practice, only 25 percent of Virginians are registered donors. Help change that statistic and register to be an eye, organ or tissue donor now.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world." Please see the insert in your bulletin and the display in the parish hall after the service. I am available for any questions or concerns you may have or to help you complete an organ donation card. Please join me now in prayer.

Father, I ask your guidance for those considering the option of becoming an organ donor. Please bring health to those waiting for organs and bless the souls of those who died waiting. I especially ask for thanksgiving for all of the donors who have so generously shared the "Gift of Life" with others. In Your name we pray, Amen.