

Sermon Preached During an All Saints Service
"Victory!"
1 Corinthians 15:51-58
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Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church; Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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Around thirty years ago, I was invited to have dinner at the home of one of my members with the Rev. Paul Pierson, the former Dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary and who was then serving as the Interim Minister of the Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Southern California. During our conversation, he shared with us several stories about former President Ronald Reagan who, after retiring from the White House, was a member and regular attendee at his services. He said that not long after he was called as Interim, he was contacted by a special Federal agent whose sole job was to make prior arrangements in the event that a current or former President died. Because President Reagan was a member of the church, if he were to die while Rev. Pierson was the acting-minister at the time, there would be a certain protocol he would be expected to follow. Twelve years later, those same careful preparations were at long last carried out when the nation's 40th President passed away from complications arising from his Alzheimer's.

Three weeks ago, Rose and I travelled to New Jersey to perform a very SIMILAR function as that Federal agent had for the President. We had to get together with my niece and nephew to ensure that the arrangements for my twin brother's funeral--whose OWN passing could occur any day now--were in order. A year or two ago, the doctor found cancer in Howard's colon and even after a spate of chemo and radiation treatments, it has CONTINUED to spread. When we visited him at the nursing home in which he currently resides, we found that his attitude was not one of resignation, that is, awaiting for death to cruelly come and claim him. Rather, it was an attitude of FAITH and HOPEFULNESS such that where we had come all that way to offer HIM some solace, we discovered WE were the ones being consoled INSTEAD. At any time of the day, he could be found saying his prayers or reading his Bible or listening to religious broadcasts on the television set. He was emphatic in saying, "David, I'm not afraid of death. There's never been a moment while I've been in this bed that I've ever felt alone for I know that Jesus has been present at my side the entire time. And he has promised me that as surely as he holds my hand on THIS side of death, he will continue to be holding it on the OTHER as WELL." As we left him that evening, fully aware that it would probably be the last time we would see him alive, rather than overcome with a deep sense of dejection and gloom, Rose and I found ourselves filled with a profound sense of peace, a comfort that only the HOLY SPIRIT could have imparted. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, once said of his followers, "My people die well," meaning that because of the hope they shared in a future resurrection, they had no real fear of death. Like Wesley's Methodists, I feel that Howard has been doing an extraordinary job of showing us all of how to "die well."

Notwithstanding my brother, I believe EVERYONE, Christian or non-Christian, shares SOME fear about death- it's only part of being human. All of us come into this world with an

innate sense of self-preservation, even the MOST SPIRITUAL among us. Some years ago, Billy Graham was being interviewed on the Larry King Show and Larry asked him to recount one of the most harrowing episodes he ever experienced. Billy shared about a plane trip he once took in which he was certain the plane was going to crash. When asked by the interviewer if he was AFRAID that he might die, the evangelist replied, "Honestly, Larry? Yes I was."

Basically, every human life follows the same biological process: at death, the heart stops beating, the neurons stop firing, our muscles tense and begin to decay as the cells decompose. It's what happens NEXT that complicates the entire process- when decisions have to be made regarding the person's body. It is a fact we just don't deal well with death and dying in our culture. The funeral parlor is a relatively NEW invention- a product of the industrial age. Over a hundred years ago, you didn't have "funeral directors" but "undertakers" who were primarily responsible for burying the deceased. There were no funeral homes- the body was usually prepared by the person's friends and viewed in his or her OWN home. There were no fleet of hearses and staff of embalmers and cosmetologists, no metal caskets, no mortuary chapels and "perpetual care" cemeteries- just a simple memorial service, a few words from the minister, and afterwards, the body was laid to rest in a plain pine box.

Years ago, I had a member of my congregation who as a young girl saw her brother and sister succumb to the great Spanish flu outbreak of 1918, a pandemic that was estimated to have claimed upwards of fifty million lives throughout the world and close to 700,000 deaths in our own nation. She said she remembered the undertaker coming to their home, preparing both bodies, and then laying them out side-by-side in the front room for friends and family members to drop by and pay their respects. I have no doubt we would RECOIL at the thought of such an exhibition taking place within our OWN homes, today.

Once the viewing has concluded, the options can then seem endless. Persons can be embalmed with formaldehyde and placed in a coffin underground; cremated in a furnace; left out in the open air; liquefied in an alkaline solution; composted under a pile of mulch; frozen in a cryogenic container; mummified; or planted at the roots of a sapling. Some pay to have their ashes compressed into a diamond while others opt for having their body freeze-dried and then vibrated into dust. I performed a funeral for a man who afterwards was cremated and his ashes deposited inside a reef off the coast of Florida. The options have become ENDLESS with new techniques for the treatment of dead bodies always arising.

Throughout the years, our burial customs have changed CONSIDERABLY along with our appetite for death. In a society obsessed with youth and good looks, we try to place as much distance between ourselves and the idea of death and dying that we can. We can tolerate the IMAGINARY deaths, the FICTITIOUS deaths that we see in the movies such as in the popular "slasher" films or our favorite television shows, but the REAL deaths- the deaths of our neighbors, our family, our friends, the people we know and love, THESE tend to occur out of sight in hospitals and nursing homes.

Alfred C. Rush has documented how early Christians responded to the death of one of their own in a non-Christian society. Where the Romans avoided touching the body, sometimes

refusing even to LOOK at the dead; CHRISTIANS gave their dead the kiss of peace. Among the Romans, the task of laying out the body was a chore given to a slave; among CHRISTIANS it was work of love carried out by family and friends. The Romans marched to the graveyard to the sound of trumpets and lutes, the CHRISTIANS to the chanting of psalms. When a poor Roman died, he was buried unceremoniously in a common burying ground; CHRISTIANS raised funds for the burial of their poor.

There is a distinctively CHRISTIAN approach to death as there is to life that runs COUNTER to society's philosophy of death and dying. BECAUSE we believe we are created by God and are God's children, we view ourselves as creatures of dignity and worth, even while we die. BECAUSE Christ is ever-enlarging our love and sympathies, our concerns extend EQUALLY to the terminally ill and their grieving families. Did not Jesus consistently go out of his way to minister to the bereaved, even reminding his followers, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." BECAUSE Christ assures us with his promise "I shall never leave or forsake you" we know NOTHING shall ever separate us from his presence or his love, that he will accompany us all our days throughout this life and on into the next. BECAUSE we do not believe that death is a finality but rather a door to a greater, more WONDROUS existence, we do not despair- "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that sleep."

What makes a Christian approach to death and dying SIGNIFICANTLY different from that of the non-Christian is that we are equipped with a "hope" that has been given to us by God- a hope that overcomes and even EXTINGUISHES however great our fear of death may be. As the Apostle Paul writes, "We don't want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will raise up those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." Death is STILL the last enemy, but with Christ's own death and resurrection, death no longer has any final claim over us; it no longer has the last word. Yes, we shall all have to undergo the process of sickness, disease, and even death- no one can be spared that. Even Lazarus whom had been raised up had to die a second time. But in face of the threat of sickness and death, we know the final outcome, we know how the story ends for us. Our guarantee of it is found in Christ's cross and resurrection.

Perhaps we can clarify it with this analogy. The most significant event in Europe during World War II occurred on June 6, 1944 when the Allied armies stormed the beaches of Normandy- it was the largest naval armada ever assembled. What made it ESPECIALLY significant was that D-Day GUARANTEED the eventual destruction of the Axis powers in Europe. Though the war continued with seeming uncertainties along the way, the outcome was in fact DETERMINED. But it wasn't until May 8, otherwise known as V-E or "Victory in Europe" Day, that the RESULTS of the forces set in motion eleven months earlier were at last REALIZED. A year of continuous aerial, naval, and trench assaults would still have to be carried out before it was successfully concluded with the enemy's surrender.

Likewise, the kingdom of God was at war with the forces of this world. But God could not take dominion of the creation so long as sin, the seed of rebellion, remained in it. So God

sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross to pay the debt for our sin and thereby provide for us to be made holy and fit for God's rule. Christ's death and resurrection- the D-Day of human history- assured us of his ultimate victory. But the reality is that we are STILL on the beaches. The enemy has not yet been vanquished, and the fighting is still ugly. Christ's invasion has assured the ultimate outcome however- victory for God and his people that will inevitably be manifested at some future date. Yes, the fighting against the adversary continues- daily we fight illness and pain, pride and temptation, depression and even death. But final victory IS assured. Christ's assault upon Satan left the outcome no longer in doubt- it's only a matter of time before he returns and subjects all things under his authority. Church, have no doubt about that!

One of the most powerful testimonies of the power of faith in the face of death I have ever witnessed occurred back in the summer of 1975. I was employed back then as a teller for Dry Dock Savings Bank in midtown Manhattan in New York City, a few blocks from Central Park. That afternoon, I had an appointment to meet with the Vice-President of the bank whose office was located up on the third floor. But in order to get there, one had to take the elevator up to the second floor, then walk across to the other side of the bank and take another elevator up to the third. While waiting for the elevator to arrive at the second floor to take me to the floor just above it, I stood next to a large window while a terrible electrical storm raged outside. At exactly 3:00 (I had checked my watch so as to make sure I would not be late for my appointment), there occurred a bright flash followed by a loud thunderous crash causing everyone in the bank to jump out of their skins. Lightning had struck somewhere only a short distance from the building. Without thinking any more about it, I then proceeded to get in the elevator and on to my meeting with the bank executive.

Arriving home from work that evening, I turned on the news and the lead story was how three children--two brothers and a friend--were killed by a lightning strike at precisely 3:00 that afternoon at Central Park. It was the same lightning bolt that had suddenly startled me while waiting for the elevator to come. On the television, the reporter was interviewing the father of two of the dead boys. Now I was expecting him to be inconsolable at the loss of his sons, perhaps even filled with terrible anger at God and the world for this terrible injustice to his family. Instead, he calmly looked into that camera and said, "This is indeed a terrible tragedy for us, but we are a Christian family and all three boys believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. God will surely give us grace to bear up in the days ahead. But right now, we rejoice in the knowledge that Jesus conquered death so that we never have to be afraid of it, that because HE lives, I know that my two sons and their friend shall live again also." As he spoke, I had no doubt that his heart was heavy with grief, but it was an anguish tempered by an even GREATER awareness- the confidence that comes with faith that with Christ, death never has to have the last word. That man understood Paul's word of instruction, that to be absent from the body IS to be present with the Lord. My eyes filled with tears as I listened to that demonstration of how the forces of death and despair are never a match when contending against the grace we receive from God that has been bolstered by Christian hope.

Church, I hope that after your long years as a child of God and a member of the Body of

Christ, you firmly believe that Jesus Christ HAS INDEED conquered death and that what happens afterwards is not something any of us has to fear! By dying and rising to life again, we see God's love for us in sending his only-begotten Son to die on our behalf. Through Jesus Christ, we see God's power to free men and women from fear, from guilt, from loneliness and alienation, from death itself, and thus, transform us into what he now intends us to become. Through his Church, the risen Savior is constantly summoning all people to share in his triumph and receive his benefits. Through Sunday worship and the sacraments, we continually recall and celebrate his victory.

But UNTIL Christ returns, there are STILL battles to be waged. The conflict with sin and death is one no person is exempted from. We are all born into this world corrupted by it- it taints all our moral decisions and eventually we all have to die. But Christ's victory reminds us that death does not have the last word, that even though our flesh returns to dust, the day WILL come when Christ returns for us, raises us up, and then presents us with NEW bodies. And so we DON'T despair, we NEVER give up for our faith assures us that the victory is ALREADY ours. Despite hardship, despite weakness, despite sickness and the threat of death, we CAN remain confident. Christ's victory ensures our peace and joy through the WORST of trials for we become MORE than conqueror's through him who loves us. Like Paul, we TOO can triumphantly exclaim, "O grave, where is thy victory! O death, where is thy sting!" Amen and amen.