

All Saints/Memorial Sunday

3 November 2019

A Celebration of Life

I've done a lot of funerals in my twenty-odd years as a pastor. That's not that long, but even in that time I've seen some things change. One thing that has developed in that time is the idea of a "Celebration of Life." Increasingly, family members stress to me that they don't want the service to be dreary and gloomy but rather a celebration of their loved one's life. And why not? We Christians teach about eternal life, after all. So I've generally agreed. Well, what used to be an occasional request has now become the norm. Even obituaries have started using the term: "A celebration of life will be held at Lake Street United Methodist Church at 11:00am." In fact, this celebration thing has become a business. I read an article earlier this year about a new profession that has arisen in places where a lot of very wealthy people live: funeral planner. You know, like wedding planners. These individuals hire theaters or ballrooms and bring in big name bands and comedians and food trucks serving the favorite foods of the deceased and turn the memorial service into the social event of the season – destination funerals – all in the name of making the memorial gathering a time of celebration.

Just in the past couple of years, though, this "celebration of life" thing has started to make me a little uneasy. I noticed that the families *always* explain their desire for a happy time by saying, "Mom wouldn't have wanted us to be gloomy."

Really? I don't want to sound selfish or anything, but when I die, I kind of hope some people will be sad. You know, I've done a couple of funerals at which nobody was at all sorry that the person was gone, and *those* are miserable occasions. I think it's way better to have lived a life that some people will miss. In the end, I've come to the conclusion that while we definitely have reasons to celebrate as we grieve, many of these requests for a "celebration of life" are really about not wanting to grieve at all, not wanting to have unhappy feelings. So now, when people ask me for a "celebration," I don't argue, but I do suggest that we need time for crying and grieving and feeling unhappy, too. Sadness is normal and healthy and necessary. The only way to get past grief is to go through it. To deny it is to prolong it.

And so here we are today – not to be morbid and depressing, but simply to recognize the reality of death, to acknowledge that it happens to people that we love and that because we love them, it hurts. What can I say? It's worth it. Loving and being loved is worth the pain. So today we grieve together.

SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE

Corinne Donahue

mother of Jacquie Johnson

Margie Riste

mother of Cindy Moores

Earl Reppert

father of Cindy Volkman

Everett Blakeley, Jr.

husband of Marty Fisher-Blakeley, father of Matt

Allen Staves

husband of Susie

Juanita Bessire

mother of Jackie Kruse

Rachel Morley

Irving (Bill) Nelson

husband of Ruth

Marcella Hennig
Delbert Thomas
Eleanor Bushendorf
Janet Kiebler

mother of Bonnie Hennig-Piper, sister of Colleen Bates
father of Linda Mueller

mother of Linda Peterson

Lord Jesus, we bring you our grief.

You who wept at the grave of Lazarus, weep beside us.
You who knew the death of those you loved,
You who faced the same death that we ourselves face,
Share our tears, share our anger, share our love.

And then, Lord, walk with us through to the other side.

Not that we may forget our grief, but that in time we may bear it more lightly,
May build from it greater compassion for others,
May learn from it a deeper kinship with all humanity.
I pray that we may become like you in our love and our grief
and that, like you, we may rise – not only above grief, but above death itself.
Made like you, like you we rise;
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies. Amen.

We read now from the Gospel of John, a brief conversation between Jesus and Martha, just before Jesus raises Martha's brother Lazarus from the dead. We read chapter 11, verses 17-27:

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' ²³Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' ²⁵Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

So now, let me talk for just a moment about the real reason that we followers of Christ can celebrate through grief: because Christ has overcome death.

Now stay with me here. I'm not just offering up the usual easy comfort of the funeral visitation line: "Well, he's in heaven now." Let's look again at our story. Jesus arrives at the home of Martha and Mary, shortly after their brother Lazarus has died. Martha comes out to meet him, grieving, and Jesus says, "Your brother will rise, you know." Martha replies – and this always strikes me as someone dutifully repeating a trite word of comfort – "Yes, Lord, I know. He will rise again on the last day." To this point the scene sounds *exactly* like that conventional exchange where one person says, "Well, he's in a better place now," and the mourner has nothing to say but, "Yes, that's right. That's such a comfort. Thank you for coming today."

But that's not what Jesus meant. He says to Martha, "Who's talking about someday, some future resurrection? I am resurrection. Not one day. Now. And I am life. Not in the sweet by-and-by. Now." Jesus didn't come to bring life someday; he came to bring life now. In chapter 10, Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life, and may have it more abundantly than ever." Jesus did not come to earth to bring a consolation prize for those who have lost the game of life. The resurrection that Jesus brings is one that starts now. The eternal life that he promises begins as soon as we're ready to start living it. In our faith, death is not the end of the line; it's a bump in a much longer road.

I have not only done a lot of funerals, but I have occasionally had the inexpressible honor of being present with some people as they died. I have been with people who have died well, calmly and with courage, and I have known at least one who died in abject terror. Here is my observation about what makes the difference. It is not whether you believe in a God or in a heaven. ("Yes, Lord, I know I will rise on the last day.") No, the shared trait of all those who died in peace is that they were all people who had already begun living their eternal lives, were already living lives toward Christ. People like Al Staves, who spent the last forty years of his life mentoring fellow alcoholics toward sobriety. People like Everett Blakeley, who never stopped asking God questions and never gave up waiting for the answers. People like Juanita and Bill and Marcy and Del who are remembered above all for their love. We mourn these lives, among others, today – because these lives are worth mourning, worth remembering. Then, having mourned, these are the lives we celebrate.

And so let us celebrate these saints, now among the larger communion of saints, loved companions who are farther along the road of abundant, eternal life that we share.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing,
always and everywhere to give thanks to you,
Almighty God,
Creator of heaven and earth:
God of Abraham and Sarah, God of Miriam and Moses,
God of Joshua and Deborah, God of Ruth and David,
God of the priests and the prophets, God of Mary and Joseph,
God of the apostles and the martyrs,
God of our mothers and our fathers,
God of our children to all generations.
And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven,
we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.**

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ.
By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection
you gave birth to your Church,
delivered us from slavery to sin and death,
and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.

On the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread,
gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."
When the supper was over he took the cup,
gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant,
poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us,
as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,
and on these gifts of bread and wine.
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,
that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.
Renew our communion with all your saints,
especially those whom we have named before you.
Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
strengthen us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us,
looking to Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith.
By your Spirit make us one with Christ,
one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world,
until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.
Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church,
all honor and glory is yours, almighty God, now and forever.

Amen.

One last word. Another observation from those pre-funeral family meetings: the families who are most insistent on having a happy time at the service, with no room being made for sad feelings, are invariably the ones who have the least connection to faith. It is as if our faith not only gives us cause to celebrate but also permission to grieve. Permission granted. Thanks be to God.
Amen.