

Grieving But Celebrating

November 12, 2017

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Last week I began a four week series of sermons about an uncomfortable topic, death.

Death is a subject that we prefer to avoid but we can't. It is inevitable. Friends and loved ones die and we grieve their loss. That is completely natural and understandable but we must not let our grief consume us. Instead we should look forward with hope to what comes after death. One pastor said, *"The mortality rate for human beings is hovering around one hundred percent."*⁽¹⁾ It is exactly one hundred percent. No one is immortal. In due course, we all will die. *"Death is the great equalizer, irrespective of vocation, wealth, social status, class and creed. It comes for all of us."*⁽¹⁾

The Christian people of Thessalonica, in our scripture reading, expected Christ's return and salvation soon. When that happened everyone who was alive would be saved. They understood that but were worried about those who had died previously. What about them?

Paul was assuring them that the dead would not be forgotten and, in fact, Christ would raise them from the dead to join the living in salvation.

When a loved one dies we realize that death is irreversible. The person is gone, and we grieve our loss. Yet *"... Paul teaches us that, at the coming of the Lord Jesus, those who have gone on before will rise first, and we 'shall be caught up together with them ... And thus we shall always be with the Lord ...'.*

"C. S. Lewis said, 'Christians never say goodbye.' I'm eagerly awaiting that ultimate reunion." (Our Daily Bread, September 27, 2014)

Brian Erickson⁽¹⁾ said, *"At the core of our Christian faith is a word about death, broken wide open on Easter Sunday ...*

"The Christian approach to death must somehow paradoxically embrace the reality of human loss and the hope of eternal life."

Paul does not suggest that we should not grieve. We know the pain that death brings. But the hope of resurrection and being with Christ eases our grief.

Brian Erickson told a touching story that I want to share with you:

"Nancy's son Tripp suffered from cystic fibrosis. As Tripp lay in the hospital in his final days, Nancy asked him if she could read Scripture to him to comfort him. She wasn't sure what to read, and he could sense that, so he told her to turn to page 1649. The numbers 16 and 49 were two of his favorites, since Joe Montana was number 16 and he played for the 49ers."

“She flipped open her bible, but it ended on page 1334. There was no page 1649, because the New Testament started over with page one. She was about to tell Tripp to try again, but when she did the math in her head and realized that page 315 of the New Testament would have been page 1649, ... she turned there.

“There she found these words, from the apostle Paul to the Thessalonian church: ‘But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.’

“Tripp turned to his mother, his CO₂ level rising and his lungs failing, and he said, ‘Mommy, those are the sweetest verses.’

“We live in the shadow of death, but we wait for the dawn. We grieve, but not as others do for we are people of hope.”

That story says it well. Christians are people of hope.

I can recall that years ago funeral services tended to be times of profound grief but today that has changed in most cases, as it should.

I am not sure about other denominations but in the Presbyterian Church we refer to a funeral as a service of witness to the resurrection, because that is what it is. Often we refer to a funeral as a celebration of the life of the deceased.

I like it when we do that. We celebrate what the departed did during his or her life on this earth and what he or she meant to us. Rather than tears, we laugh and tell stories about the person and how much they meant to us. It is indeed a celebration. They are not gone and in due course we will see them again.

Some of my most difficult times have been at funerals of family members. I have been deeply saddened at that their passing but at the same time I rejoiced.

I have conducted quite a few funeral services since I became a pastor, a surprisingly large number since I do not serve a large church. I do get asked to conduct services for persons who were not a member of Conley Memorial or Siloam Presbyterian Churches, the two churches that I presently serve regularly.

About three years ago my brother passed away and the family asked me to conduct his funeral. That was probably the hardest thing that I ever have done as a pastor. I fully expected to break down during the service, but that did not happen.

Instead I rejoiced that his suffering was over and that he was now with God. He had been in a nursing home for a great many years, was not mobile, and could not do much of anything without assistance. His quality of life was not good at all, far from it.

His eyesight was failing and a few months before he died he asked me for a large print bible. I sent one to him but, as it turned out, he died before he was able to even open it but his

thoughts were about his family and what he knew was in that unread bible.

His funeral was not a time of grief and sadness. It was a time of joy and hope. It was a celebration of his life.

Would that all funerals were like that.

Amen.

(1) Brian Erickson in "A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series", Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016