

Sixth Sunday of Easter - Death Swallowed in Life

May 8, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Mark 12: 26-27a; 1 Corinthians 15: 1-26, 51-57

May the spoken and written word lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Where, O death, is thy victory? Where, O death, is thy sting?”

It seems Paul is quoting another source as he winds up his teaching on resurrection to the Corinthians. Some think it's a variation of a verse in Hosea and others think not. “Death has been swallowed up in victory,” and Paul adds, “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” These concluding verses of chapter 15 are an anthem of faith that Paul wants us all to know and to sing along with him. This scripture passage is recommended for a grave side service in the pastor's occasional services book. I've used it and found it to be a powerful, defiant proclamation of faith. It points to the casket or urn of ashes saying, “This is NOT the end. No matter how it may appear, this grave is not the end.” I believe that. I hope you believe that, too.

And yet there are those occasional times when it seems death is winning and won't stop stinging. Many of you know what I mean. It's a feeling you can have when several persons you've known and loved die in a short amount of time. One of the persons I had hoped to see last Sunday at Second English Lutheran Church was Dr. Fred Schilling. But he had died suddenly the Thursday before. The woman who first brought me to Second Church, Laurie, died last month after a lung transplant. The Lutheran clergy of Washington County were at their monthly meeting, ironically talking about the upcoming election of a bishop at this year's Synod Assembly, when we got word that Bishop Emeritus Jerry Knoche had died that morning. And, of course, on this particular Sunday in May, I do so miss my Mom. Some days, death still stings.

Dr. Fred Schilling still had his Kentucky southern accent though he had traveled the world as a soldier, diplomat and CIA official. I imagine his accent was disarming and valuable in his work. People tend to stereotype those with southern twangs and lilt which probably caused more than one person to wrongfully underestimate Fred's intelligence, insight and forcefulness. That would be a mistake they would only have made once.

I met Fred when I began to work at Second English Lutheran Church. He had retired from public service but was very active as a lay leader in the Lutheran Church of America and the subsequent ELCA. Raised Baptist, he had only become a Lutheran when stationed in Oslo, Norway. He was a committed follower of Christ and a Lutheran churchman who served the local and national church in a variety of ways. But the memory

first came to my mind was Fred saying, “Linda” (said with a thorough southern gentleman accent) “Linda, when are you going to seminary.” He started asking me that every once in a while throughout the years I was at Second English. Just gently throwing the seed of a calling.”As shrewd as a serpent and as innocent as a dove.” (Matt. 10:16)

Fred was married to Lucille. They had a daughter, Elin, who is as brilliant as her parents, had a gift for mastering foreign languages and who followed her Dad into the diplomatic corp. They also had a son, Fred the III who is a kind of savant. His ability to navigate the world is very challenged but if you want to know the names and locations of any American railroad line or roller coasters, just ask Fred III. His knowledge of his areas of interest of encyclopedic. He and Lucille expressed equal affection and pride in both their children and their gifts. It stung not to hear Fred say one more time, “Linda”

I met Laurie, a Lutheran from birth, when we were teachers in a Catholic elementary school. When the abuse and danger of my marriage was becoming overwhelming, she volunteered her Lutheran pastor to meet with me. That pastor would later offer me a summer job running a neighborhood camp at Second English Lutheran Church. Still later he asked me to submit my resume for a newly created full-time position in Youth and education ministries at Second Church while I was still a Catholic. In all those years, Laurie was a cheerleader, co-worker and friend. She epitomized grace and led me to discover the unconditional, undeserved, unearned love and grace of God. Mingled in the memory of that gift is the regret that we never got to mend our relationship after a rift within the church.

I first met Pastor Jerry Knoche when he was the pastor of New Hope Lutheran Church in Columbia. He was a big man with this booming voice who somehow was not intimidating but warm and engaging. His laughter could be heard for miles — no exaggeration — and it was infectious. I remember this big man sitting and listening at Synod Assemblies and Clergy retreats while doing fine needlepoint hand-work. He was among the pastors who gave me a huge Strong's Concordance reference book as a farewell gift when I went off to seminary. I remember how the Holy Spirit utterly surprised him when elected bishop of the DE-MD Synod.

Yes, death can still sting. The world seems a bit emptier without Fred, Laurie and Bishop Knoche. Maybe that is the kind of thing Paul had heard from the Corinthians which prompted this portion of his letter. They have received Paul's message about the resurrection of Jesus. But it was a bigger stretch to think that resurrection had any application to themselves. As far as they could see, their departed spouses, parents, children, relative, friend were still in their graves. They might believe, like many of their

time, that when someone dies their disembodied soul is released from the body into the cosmos. Maybe now they image their soul would fly off to be with Jesus. But that's not what the resurrection had meant to Paul and those early followers. Paul was eager for them to see its fuller meaning and effect.

If you are like me, you can get lost in Paul's rhetoric. He is a master of the classical art of argument and most of us are not. He lays out steps of logic to lead to a "therefore" conclusion. If Jesus was raised from the death than those who belong to Christ will be raised, too. But there is more to this resurrection business than life after death. When Jesus was raised he had his body. He ate and drank with his disciples. He still had his wounds though they did not ache. ALL of Jesus was resurrected AND somehow that born, earthbound, killed human was also made a new creation that would never die, able to move differently in space and time. In the resurrection of Jesus, God was announcing that same kind of transformation would happen in this world and in those who believed in the resurrected Christ. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, is faith, "that God has power beyond human understanding, that life is stronger than death, that none of us can ever say for sure that everything is over for us. If God can raise the dead ---- and, just as important, if we *believe* God can raise the dead — than our despair will be temporary and our hope invincible, not because we know how to keep it alive but because God has never forgotten how to breathe life into piles of dust." ¹

All who believe in the Risen Lord are living in that resurrected life now. We live trusting Jesus' word and promises : "Because I live, you shall live also." (John 14:19) "If I go and prepared a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14: 3) "I am the way and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6a). Trusting in God who had the power and will to raised Jesus from the dead and will raise us too, our eyes of faith can be opened to see the light and reality of resurrection even now. Where is resurrection light? It is where ever life rises from ashes, hope persists against despair and love proves more powerful than hate. Not only are we able to see the unleashing of resurrection power but we are its instruments and light whenever we labor and live in Jesus name — work and life that is not in vain.

Despite what Paul says, death can still sting. But no matter how it seems, no matter how it feels, death will not win, death will not be victorious. God is. The absence of Fred, Laurie and Jerry stings AND the certainty of their resurrected life elates. And I also remember and rejoice in the glimmers of God's resurrection power I saw through

them throughout their lives. Like how they each continued to actively inspire faith, love and seek justice even as they battled age and illness. You've seen that resurrection light, too, I'm sure, "in people who are laid low and by all rights should never rise again who suddenly sit up in their ashes, brush themselves off, and go on to live"² fully and with purpose and peace. " Indeed, that describes what has happen in many of you gathered here. Maybe I should have skipped this sermon and just asked you to share resurrection stories with one another. A bit late for that. But not too late for us to open our eyes to the truth, hope and certainty of God's resurrection among and in us. Not too late for us to tell others about those times when it seemed despair, broken relationships, sadness, sin, death and darkness would have the final word in our lives --- - but somehow did not. That is the resurrection at work now and forever more. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. . Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 5/7/16

ENDNOTES

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surviving Crucifixion" God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998 p. 73

2. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surviving Crucifixion" God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998 p. 74