Sermon, November 3, 2024

"The Rest of the Story"

All Saints' Sunday

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Enter the Grim Reaper, the black-cloaked, scythe-wielding personification of death. We all know exactly -who he is and what he wants. He comes for every person, hourglass in hand, waiting for the last grain of sand to fall. When it does, he collects the soul with a well-practiced cut of his razor-sharp blade. - William Harris

Life is hard. Then you die. Then they throw dirt in your face. Then the worms eat you. - David Gerrold

Sorry if that seems like a cold and brutal way to start a sermon on this fine day but that is certainly part of the story. The question of the day is whether that is the whole story or in the words of Paul Harvey, we need to hear the rest of the story. We gather today, as people in other faiths and other cultures do at this time in November, to not only remember our deceased loved ones but to proclaim that human death is not the final chapter.

Our first reading from the Book of Wisdom says,

In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.

And our epistle from the Book of Revelation said,

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

And finally in the gospel, Jesus, as he was preparing to raise Lazarus from the tomb, said,

"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

There is a reason all three of today's lessons are some of the more popular choices during a funeral service. Note that Jesus doesn't deny the reality of death. He mourns it. Is angered by it. Rejects it.

Death, of course, is inevitable, and its pain, its loss, its cause for anger is all true and real and we need plenty of time to grieve it, more time than our society and even us, think is

necessary. Still we allow death to have its way and a say before it should. We allow death to determine a way of being in the world that has acquiesced to a matter of factness, an inevitability that truncates the power of the Kingdom of God, the presence of God, in our midst. And finally, we allow death to have more power than resurrection. We allow it to define our existence at times. He's a widower; she's a widow; they lost their mother this year. All true but it doesn't have to define our total existence even if at times it feels like it does. There is a "rest of the story".

And that "rest of the story" is why the gospel of the raising of Lazarus was chosen for this feast day this year. The whole story of the raising of Lazarus is for us to realize that resurrection is not just our future promise but our present reality. Resurrection here and now, what Jesus promises to Martha, means that life, and life abundantly for all, is what is at stake. It is so very easy to postpone abundant life to life after death. But a close reading of our Gospel texts this week reveals how misguided this belief is. The life of the saints is now. The life of saints is that which we witness. Lives lived as saints is what we are called to do and to be.

The question is do we believe it? Do we believe our loved ones are in everlasting life with God? Do we believe we are called to be saints? And if we do, how do we do it? You may find yourself at a challenging time in your personal history as you grieve the death of a loved one. Most, all?, of us are in a personally challenging times as we face a national election two days from now. There will be deaths as a result of this election – hopefully the physical ones will be few though there may be some. But the emotional and spiritual deaths will be harsh and strong. Someone's vision of what it means to be a democracy, of what it means to be an American, of the values our nation lives by is going to take a severe body blow. How are we going to deal with that reality? That is the reason our Episcopal Church has become involved in the election – involved not to tell you whom to vote for but to tell you to vote, why prayers written many years ago are included in the Book of Common Prayer and are still applicable today: prayers for sound government, a prayer for the nation, a prayer for an election, a prayer for guidance, a prayer for peace, a prayer in times of conflict. Remember that our church was founded at the same time as the founding of our nation and adopted the same principles of governance and democracy as our new nation. When we gather at our National Convention every three years, our Convention delegates are the largest democratic body in the world. We have an investment in democracy and our nation. So it is our right to be involved and to vote but how as a people do we cope when half the country will be in mourning? Stay tuned.

Death has been no stranger to Karen and me this year. My sister-in-law passed away last December; Karen's mother died in January; our beloved pet dog Riley died in July; we have had more deaths at St. Luke's than my first year here. As a consequence I have spent more time at cemeteries than in recent years and have grown in appreciation of the burial service at the graveside. The words are fewer, but the emotions can be stronger. That time of farewell whether to urn or casket has a sense of finality but only a sense. There is more to the story, at least for some. And graveside services are mostly family and let me clue you in on a big secret: we romanticize family life in our culture and how easy it is to get along. It isn't. And long-time hurts can flare up at these times. And yet at the cemeteries I see closeness and sharing and kindness, maybe not seen as much otherwise.

So the rest of the story? It's that death does not have the final word – that there is more to the story. It's that we are called to be saints – no exceptions – no one who sat in the back of the classroom or who never had the right answer is not included. We are all called to be saints – to be people of faith, and hope, and love even, especially, when times are challenging.

And one thing our saints discovered in their lives is that one of the most important things in life is to practice kindness.

St. Therese of Lisieux: *Kindness is my only guiding star. In its light, I sail a straight route, I have my motto written on my sail: 'To live in love.'"*

St. Basil the Great: *"A tree is known by its fruit; a man by his deeds. A good deed is never lost; he who sows courtesy reaps friendship, and he who plants kindness gathers love."*

And then there's David Gerrold, who at the beginning of this sermon had the quote about death and worms:

"I have a very simple philosophy of life:
Kindness. Ferocious, unrelenting, ruthless, committed, passionate, kindness.
Life is sacred everywhere. We all have better things to do than beat each other up.
Arguing for the exception is to invest it with energy, it's to negotiate the loophole. The commitment to kindness must be total."

And finally the English author, George Eliot: *When death comes it is never our tenderness that we repent from, but our severity.*

As people of faith, hope and love, can we be saints who truly know "the rest of the story"?