

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

June 10, 2018, The 3rd Sunday After Pentecost/The 10th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 138, II Corinthians 4:13-5:1

“AN ETERNAL WEIGHT OF GLORY”

I have always been thankful that my first experience of conducting funerals took place in Northern Ireland. I was a student pastor there before my final year of seminary, back in 1987-1988. I am thankful that I got to be a young pastor in a place where death was an expected part of life.

I don't know what the funeral practices there are like now, but 30 years ago most funeral visitations took place in the home of the person who had died. Once their bodies were embalmed and they were prepared for burial, their caskets were brought back into the family home and opened for a period of one to two days.

The family members took turns sitting with the body of their loved one, day and night. Family and friends would gather daily, children were in and out of the room with the body. Hours were spent telling stories, reminiscing, weeping together, and laughing together and remembering the good life of the person who had died. Death was a part of life.

People didn't feel strange having the body of their loved one in the home. That was the way it was done. Cup after cup of tea was served, friends and neighbors brought in food, and life went on around the casket of the loved one. Their body was not left alone until the time of burial. Daily life stopped between the death and the burial, and the person's life was honored and remembered.

Then on the day of the church service, the hearse would come to the home. Unlike our American Funeral cars, the sides of the hearse are glass and the casket is displayed inside the car, so all can see it.

In decades past a man's casket would be carried from his home to the end of his land or farm fields by six men, carrying the casket on their shoulders. The family would follow behind. By the late 80's when I was there, many people lived in subdivisions, so a man's casket would be carried from his front door to the end of his subdivision and then loaded into the hearse.

Most often, in the time I was there, a women's casket would be taken from the home and immediately loaded into the hearse.

Then as the men walking the casket, or the hearse with the deceased in it, passed through the neighborhood, all the neighbors who were home would stand by their front doors for a final goodbye.

It was a powerful honoring of the person and the life they had shared together in the neighborhood.

There was a respect for death, and the journey to the grave.

I am also thankful for what happened at the graveside. When we arrived, there was no Astroturf covering the mound of dirt that had been dug. There was no Astroturf covering the grave so that no one could look into that 6 foot hole in the ground.

The Committal Service at the graveside did not begin until the casket had been lowered by ropes down into the grave. Once the casket hit the bottom, the ropes were removed and we gathered around the hole in the ground and then the ancient, always true, words of Jesus were spoken into the silence:

“I am the resurrection, and the life,
Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live
And those who live and believe in me will never die.”

And later as the first shovels full of dirt began to hit the coffin, the other pastor, or I, proclaimed the words I continue to say each time I stand at the graveside of a church member:

“And now in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life,
Through our Lord Jesus Christ,
We commend to Almighty God our sister / our brother in the faith
And we commit their body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

I am thankful that I learned how to be a pastor with grieving people in a place where death was a natural part of life.

I am thankful that I got to sit with grieving people in their homes, sitting around the open caskets of their loved ones.

I am thankful that I got to stand at graves with nothing artificial covering the reality of what was happening there.

That year of ministry helped strengthen my faith in the promises that we read this morning in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians.

Paul was writing to the church in Corinth reminding them, and us,
that in the midst of all that life is holding,
in the midst of the difficult times we live in,
in the midst of the losses in our lives,

we are to hold onto hope—the hope that was given to us in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Paul used a line that scholars believe was probably part of the early church’s liturgy, or words used in worship: “we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.” (Feasting on the Word)

In the midst of living life, the promise of heaven are real. Paul wrote: “For we know that if the early tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (5:1)

Paul calls to us with these words: “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure...”

It is because the promises of Jesus are trustworthy,
and because the promises of heaven are true,
and because death is a part of life
that I have three challenges for you this morning.

The first is a challenge I have given you every few years in a sermon and it involves the children and young adults who are in your life. Whether they are your own children, your grandchildren, nieces or nephews, or children or young adults that God has placed into your life,
relying on your faith, please help them learn that death is a part of life.

We no longer live in a culture that even talks about death, let alone prepares for death and grief. But I promise you that the children and young adults in your life have questions.

Children take their cues from us, and if we are afraid to talk about death, if we avoid the topic at all costs, they will not ask us the questions they have.

And let me say to those of you who have children who are grown adults, this is a challenge for the ways you care for them as well.

Now I realize that what I'm asking you to do is not easy. I am asking you to deal with your own feelings about death and dying. And more than dealing with your feelings about death and dying I'm asking you to think about what you really believe about the promises of Jesus about eternal life.

I want to say very clearly that my door is open, or I can come to your home if you would like to talk about these things before you have conversations with your children or grandchildren, or the young adults in your life.

Having these conversations will push you to think about your own death, and the death of those you love. I truly do know that what I'm asking isn't easy.

And yet I truly believe that what I'm asking you to do is to live the life of faith, that does not end at death.

In life of faith we do not lose heart when we walk into the valley of the shadow of death, because we are followers of Jesus Christ who has given us the gift of eternal life through his death and resurrection.

Paul says it this way in his first letter to the Thessalonians (4:13-14) "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. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died."

Because this Good News is our hope, I want to give you a second challenge once again, as I have through the years, to not only have conversations with your children or grandchildren, or the children or young adults God has put into your life, but to help them practice the journey of grief.

I believe that one of the best ways to do this is to bring them to visitations and funerals for adults in their lives that they know, but may not be particularly close to. Bring them to the funeral for a neighbor, or for one of the church members that they talk to in the hallways each Sunday.

This lets you sit with them in a Sanctuary of grieving people, and experience what that is like. It lets you talk with them about what you believe about the promises of heaven. It lets them know that grieving and tears are a part of life. It lets them know that they can grieve and be safe with people who believe in God's loving promises.

It lets them stand at a casket and really see what death looks like, with people of faith who believe that death does not have the final word.

The gift of coming to one or more of these funerals with your children or grandchildren, or the children or young adults God has put into your life, is that they are experiencing loss and grief for someone who is step removed from their lives.

You are giving them the experience of being at funerals, before they come to the funeral for their parent or grandparent or a beloved relative or friend.

Through the years I have helped so many adults in their 20's, 30's and 40's prepare their parent's funerals, and they have never been to a funeral before. They have never walked the journey of grief before and now they are walking one of the hardest journeys.

Let me also say that if you are an adult who has never been to a funeral, I encourage you to practice this journey of grief as well. Take someone you trust with you, and come to the funeral of a neighbor or a church member, or someone you don't know as well. Let yourself walk through the journey of grief that happens at a funeral.

Let yourself feel the emotions of saying goodbye.

Let yourself hear God's promises in Scripture, read in a room of grieving people.

Let yourself sing the hymns of faith even with the lump in your throat and the tears in your eyes, and experience what it is like to join your voices with other grieving believers.

There is nothing in our culture that will encourage you to do this for yourself, or your children or your grandchildren, or the children and young adults in your life.

But I believe in Christian culture there is every reason to practice walking the journey of grief, because it is part of walking the journey of faith.

And let me also say that if you are a child or young adult who has questions and thoughts about death and dying and grief, my door is open. Or I would be glad to sit with you and your parents, or you and your grandparents and talk about death and dying and grief, because I really do believe that it is a part of life.

My third challenge for you this morning is to take all of this a step further. During the years as I have sat with family's planning their parents, or grandparents or spouse's funeral it has been so comforting for those families when they have been left funeral service plans and ideas by the person who has died.

So today when you leave the sanctuary you will find a table with three pieces of paper you can take home with you. These papers are for you if you are a child, teenager or adult here this morning.

You will find an outline of the funeral service that I use when I meet to plan with families.

There is also a list of suggested Scripture readings and suggested hymns that the congregation can sing at your service, or that a soloist can sing.

If you choose to fill out the service outline with the songs and Bible verses you'd like at your funeral, then let someone in your family, or a friend, know where you have filed that information.

If you would like to have us keep a copy of your plans here at the church we would be glad to keep that information for your family or friends, just make sure they know it is here.

Some people have chosen to write their obituaries and we have them in a file here at the church.

If you would like to meet with me to talk about this, let me say again that my door is open, or I can come to your home, or meet you for coffee or a meal and we can talk about your plans.

For the last few months I've been feeling like it was time to offer a class where I could hand out these papers and discuss them. But then I began to wonder who would sign up for the class. So truth be told, I decided to invite you to the class without telling you in advance!

You can call this pastoral prerogative, or sneaky and devious, but I truly hope that you will see this as me caring for you and all the seasons of your life.

Death is a part of life. None of us will avoid this step in the journey of faith. But we can talk about it, and prepare for it, and help the children and young adults in our lives be on this journey with us.

We are people of hope.

We are people of faith who live inside the promises of Jesus.

The cross and the grave are empty; death does not have the final word.

The saving gift of God's grace in Jesus, and the promise of eternal life in heaven are the final word.

Because, in Paul's words: "we know that the God who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us into God's presence.

And in Jesus' words to his disciples in all times and places, that we find in John 14:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (John 14:1-3, 27)