

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

June 9, 2024, 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 35 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.

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, or 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.

I am thankful I got to hear the shovelfuls of dirt hit the caskets that held bodies, but not the true person, who was already home in Heaven with God.

That year of ministry helped strengthen my faith in the promises of God 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 life,

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 Sunday worship, 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) I like knowing that we are hearing the words they said in worship.

In the midst of living life, the promises of heaven are real. Paul wrote: “For we know that if the earthly 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

and because as Paul writes: we know that our God who raised Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and will present us in Jesus’ presence

That I have some challenges for you this morning.

The first challenge comes from my own childhood experiences and from experiences here at the church. When I was about 12 a long-time friend of my grandparent’s died. My grandparents had lived by Wally and Wilma for over 40 years. Whenever we came to see my grandparents, we often had a special afternoon at Wally and Wilma’s. My grandma said Wilma didn’t have grandchildren and she was borrowing us. Wilma always made us huge root beer floats and played games with us. She even bought us lawn darts which my Grandma Jen thought was atrocious because we could have been killed by them; we loved them. I sat by my grandma at Wilma’s funeral as my Grandma Jen who never cried, had tears running down her face in a steady stream and she squeezed my hand till I thought my fingers would fall off my hand. But she never said a word to me about her sadness, or asked me about mine. That side of the family didn’t believe in funerals, but we went to Wilmas because it was expected, but there was no verbal conversation about it at all. When it was over it was over. And life went on, and at dinner afterwards it was as if no one was sad, and nothing had happened. I can still remember how confused I felt because I’d seen behind my grandma’s mask, but by the Amen of the benediction she was all tidied up and things were back in place. But I had so many questions and so many feelings but no place to express them.

My challenge 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,

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. Especially after living through the Covid pandemic, they 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. It asks you to deal with your own feelings about death and dying. But 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 most importantly what I'm asking you to do is to live the life of faith.

In the 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. It isn't easy, but God will be with us and give us strength.

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 challenge you 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 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. It doesn't have to be that way; it shouldn't be that way and you can help make the difference.

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 or a friend and talk about death and dying and grief, because I really do believe that it is a part of life. And if someone you love has died and you can't find someone to go to their visitation or funeral with you, I would be honored to go with you.

My other 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 tables 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, or even better give them a copy and tell them why you've chosen what you've chosen. It may not be an easy conversation, but it will be a good one.

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 also 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.

Death is a part of life. "In life and in death we blong to God." 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", where "an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure," is waiting for us.

And in Jesus' words to his disciples, including us:

"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)
(cf: SER-18-06-10)