

“Life Goes On”

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Acts 17:22-31

John 14:18-31

[Jesus said,]

‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

In a little while the world will no longer see me,

but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.’

John 14:18-19

Let us pray... O God,

Strengthen us for the challenges before us

as individuals, as families, and as a congregation,

to meet them with creativity and commitment.

Amen

There are holidays and then there are holy days;

We generally ‘celebrate’ a holiday which can be as simple as a day off –

or a special event including a meal with family & friends

like Christmas-time or a wedding anniversary.

Then, there are those holidays we ‘observe’ –

not as a celebration, but as a time to remember.

Actually for church-going people, Sundays falls into one category or the other

to celebrate or observe as we recount the stories of our faith,

joyful and solemn.

Public holidays have their place in church services by popular expectation –

It is somewhat of a challenge for pastors to say something

about mothers on Mothers Day and about fathers on Fathers Day.

Memorial Day is just such a holiday – and within reason

we celebrate love for our country as we observe the cost

to those who gave their lives while in ‘the service’.

Our scripture lessons today allow me to touch on this theme

as Jesus was preparing his disciples for the terrible and wonderful events

in the hours and days just ahead of them.

In the other Gospels as he administered the elements of bread & cup,

he charged his disciples to remember him.

And that responsibility to remember Jesus and what he did

has been passed on to us, down through the ages.

And it is through our personal experience of loss and grief,

that we can come to a deeper understanding and appreciation

for Christ’s sacrifice.

Willard, p.2

I never really knew my cousin Ralph – who was my Dad’s uncle’s son;
He never spoke to me and I never heard him say anything to anyone,
but I remember seeing him at a family reunion in Massachusetts.
I remember how he looked – handsome with black hair and dark eyes,
almost exactly like my Dad when he was a young man in his 20s.
There was something about him – he had confidence and character,
he was aloof, but not shy or sarcastic.

When my grandmother came to visit us in New Jersey, the summer of 1968 –
I remember we picked her up at the train station
and it was on the ride home that she gave us the news:
my cousin had been killed in combat.

Ralph Willard was an Army warrant officer who flew helicopters in Vietnam .
He had done his time and was set to come home,
when a call went out for one last mission.
He was the pilot and as the aircraft was hovering while sling loading supplies,
they came under enemy fire and the tail rotor was shot off.
The helicopter went out of control and all four men aboard were killed –
besides Ralph Willard who was the pilot; there was
WO Charles Callahan, co-pilot; SSG Robert Stone, crew chief;
and SP5 Robert Parent, the door gunner.

Over the years, I learned more about Ralph
and that he had been a great baseball player –
he could have pitched professional ball.

I saw a photo of him at a beach in Vietnam,
holding a barracuda by the head and tail
before flinging it back into the surf.

His whole life was ahead of him –
he was only 20 when he died.

His parents went to the cemetery every week to place flowers on his grave.
But years and years later, they stopped going
because life goes on.

58,151 lives were lost in Vietnam, before that 36,516 troops in Korea;
625,000 Americans on both sides were killed in the Civil War –
almost 2% of the population then;
405,399 killed in WWII and 116,516 killed in WWI;
and there have been 5,491 killed in the War on Terror – so far.
There’s no comparison numerically when you know even just one.
Even so, life goes on.

Willard, p.3

Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them 'orphaned'

He was trying to prepare them for his death
and he had been saying this to them all along
since the death of John the Baptist,

"The Son of Man – the True Heir of Humanity, must suffer and die,
but on the third day rise."

This was Christ's promise to them,

but its ugly reality was a harsh death for him, nailed to a wooden cross
by Roman soldiers.

But what he was telling them was that

"Life goes on."

Life goes on – not with resignation, but as an affirmation.

Life goes on beyond this life that we know.

Life goes on for us as a human race.

"Life goes on" means to choose to live – to start over sometimes,
to claim forgiveness, to live authentically and creatively
and make the most of each day.

"Life in Christ goes on" defiant of death and the powers of evil.

"Life in Christ goes on" is a rallying cry –
a call into combat against the forces of negativity and neglect
to penetrate places of ignorance with insight
and to help transform places of fear and hatred
into communities of faith and love.

Life in Christ goes on – not just for an individual's salvation,
but for us as a community, as a nation,

and as people who share this world with other people
and other living things, the land itself, the sea and sky.

"Life in Christ goes on" implies a responsibility to the generations to come
that we are here to strive now to help make it a better world
as mature, true human beings that Christians ought to be.

Let us remember the war dead – not only our troops, but the people
caught in between, even our enemies' dead

and let the lost promise of what their lives could have been
be an inspiration to overcome the evil of armed conflict
with the good that comes from steadfast creativity
for that is what gives rise for an authentic life to go on –
life that is truly 'eternal life'.

Willard, p.4

The Apostle Paul was such a person who answered this call to action
and it took him on journeys throughout the Roman Empire
on its sea-lanes and its cobble-stoned roads
even though it would cost him his life.

He reached out to the Jewish communities in those places
amidst a kaleidoscopic variety of religions –
and when he had a chance, he spoke in public places
and demonstrated how the Christian message was competitive
with what was out there.

Paul didn't have to contend with Buddhism then –
which was already in full flower in Asia,
but was sent to help Christianity take root in Europe.

My Church History professor at Lancaster Theological Seminary,
John Payne, said in words to this effect,
“The Roman Empire was not conquered by Christianity;
The Roman Empire crumbled around Christianity.”

Something is happening again for the Christian “Church” and the world –
I believe we are entering a period of reformation and renewal.

Mars Hill Bible Church is an evangelical megachurch
that takes its name from that public place where Paul saw the statue
dedicated to “An Unknown God”.

That church hosted an art exhibit on the theme of “Peace”
and one work of art featured a quote by Mahatma Gandhi –
but somebody put an anonymous note nearby that said,
"Reality check: Gandhi's in hell."

The pastor, Rob Bell, responded to this by writing a book titled, Love Wins
in which he disparages the idea that hell is for those
who just aren't Christians –

and he was condemned by other evangelicals for this
who say that he is ‘cherry-picking’ the Bible's truth.

But Pastor Bell represents a new voice for transformation
that is line with what the UCC has been striving towards all along.

A woman called our church office last week
and asked what our church taught about the Rapture.

And I told her that here at the UCC at The Villages,
I teach that we are always in ‘the end-times’ and
we are co-workers with God for the world's redemption.

Willard, p.5

Friends, Jesus said that there would be 'wars and rumors of wars',
ethnic and religious strife, 'famines and earthquakes everywhere',
but to watch out so that we not become dismayed,
for it is necessary for such things to happen
like the pain of birth before new life can be born.

There are terrible things that happen all the time
that threaten to bully us to live lives of suspicion and hatred,
but if your love endures to the end, you will be saved.

The individual heart that is loving – come what may, and
the community that is open and affirming
will survive, because that's what makes for an authentic life –
for eternal life that goes on.

Life goes on!

Amen

*The Apostle Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit in a dream
to take the Gospel into Europe.*

In our lesson today from the Book of Acts,

Paul proclaims Christianity in a debate with Greek philosophers.

Acts 17:22-31

17:22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said,
'Athenians,

I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

23For as I went through the city and looked carefully
at the objects of your worship,

I found among them an altar with the inscription,
"To an unknown god."

What therefore you worship as unknown,
this I proclaim to you.

24The God who made the world and everything in it,
he who is Lord of heaven and earth,

does not live in shrines made by human hands,

25nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything,
since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath
and all things.

26From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth,
and he allotted the times of their existence

and the boundaries of the places where they would live,

27so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him
and find him—

though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

28For "In him we live and move and have our being";

as even some of your own poets have said,

"For we too are his offspring."

29Since we are God's offspring,

we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone,
an image formed by the art and imagination
of mortals.

30While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance,
now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

31because he has fixed a day on which

he will have the world judged in righteousness

by a man whom he has appointed,

and of this he has given assurance to all

by raising him from the dead.'

John 14:18-31

[Jesus said,]

14:18 'I will not leave you orphaned;
I am coming to you.

19In a little while the world will no longer see me,
but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

20On that day you will know that I am in my Father,
and you in me, and I in you.

21They who have my commandments and keep them
are those who love me;
and those who love me will be loved by my Father,
and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

22Judas (not Iscariot) said to him,

'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us,
and not to the world?'

23Jesus answered him,

'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them,
and we will come to them
and make our home with them.

24Whoever does not love me does not keep my words;
and the word that you hear is not mine,
but is from the Father who sent me.

25 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you.

26But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit,
whom the Father will send in my name,
will teach you everything,
and remind you of all that I have said to you.

27Peace 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.

28You heard me say to you,

"I am going away, and I am coming to you."

If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father,
because the Father is greater than I.

29And now I have told you this before it occurs,
so that when it does occur, you may believe.

30I will no longer talk much with you,
for the ruler of this world is coming.

He has no power over me;

31but I do as the Father has commanded me,
so that the world may know that I love the Father.

Rise, let us be on our way.