

“All Saints”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
November 2nd, 2014 ©
21st Sun. after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 23:1-12

[The Apostle Paul said,]

*‘Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died
so that you won’t mourn like others who don’t have any hope.’*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to understand and come to terms with death.

Comfort us with the hope that we shall meet our loved ones again.

Amen

In the Catholic tradition, the day after All Hallows’ Eve, or Halloween, is called
All Saints Day – the time for remembering Christian saints who have died.

November 2nd is All Souls Day which is generally for everyone else.

Being that we are of the UCC and not obligated to observe these holy days,
we can combine our notion of All Saints with All Souls – such that,

no matter who you are or where you are on your spiritual journey,
you’re welcome here and Heaven, too.

It so happens our lesson from 1 Thessalonians is about how Paul
responded to a question about death and the afterlife.

We don’t often talk about death in our culture –

not that we don’t get a steady stream of tragedy in the news.

Apart from such sensational stories, death comes naturally enough to all people.

To re-emphasize what the Apostle Paul said:

*‘Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died
so that you won’t mourn like others who don’t have any hope.’*

I was telling the Governing Board last week

that I have performed a lot of memorial services this year – too many.

Please understand – it is a privilege for me to serve our faith community this way,
but it does take a toll – death takes a toll.

Instead of “Four Weddings and A Funeral” – which is a 1990s movie title,

I will have had five funerals and two weddings since August!

The fourth funeral will be next Saturday

when we celebrate the life of Kathleen Happ.

Before her, other church members who passed on include

John Bell, Ron Lee, Bob Buckland, and Fred Meyer.

Touching us all here in The Villages is the death of Gary Morse

the founder and developer of this retirement community

of over 100,000 souls, on land that touches three counties.

Willard, p.2

These are terrible losses to those of us who knew and loved them –
and will miss them, though we believe that they are beyond trouble
and the suffering of this world.

We believe this, but the Bible is not very specific about what happens
at death and the afterlife.

However, Paul wanted us to know and not mourn without hope...

In the RSV, Paul speaks about death in terms of sleep:

*...we would not have you ignorant, brethren,
concerning those who are asleep,
that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 1Thess. 4:13*

So, there is a distinguishing of death as ‘sleep’,
which can also be found in John 11 – the story of Lazarus,
when Jesus told his disciples,

‘Lazarus has fallen asleep and we must go to awaken him.’

They didn’t get what he was saying until he told them directly,
‘Lazarus is dead!’

So, what do Jesus and Paul mean when they talk about ‘death’ in terms of ‘sleep’?
At the very least, it means that death is not the end.

Paul goes on to talk about those who die ‘in Jesus’, saying:

*Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe
that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus. 1 Thess. 4:14*

Now, does that mean that only Christians
go to Heaven?

I learned yesterday at Come & Consider Class
how the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church
teaches that only Missouri Synod Lutherans go to Heaven.

I am reminded of that joke about Saint Peter leading a Methodist
through the streets of Heaven, and as they pass by a wall, he says,
“Sh-hh! This is where the Baptists live.

They think they’re the only ones here!”

In the Memorial Service liturgy I use in funerals,
there is this reference from Romans 6:3-5...

*When we were baptized into Christ Jesus,
we were baptized into Christ’s death.*

*By our baptism, then, we were buried with Christ and shared Christ’s death,
in order that, just as Christ was raised from death
by the glorious power of God, so too we might live a new life.*

*For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his,
we shall certainly be united with Christ in a resurrection like his.*

Willard, p.3

What I believe this means is that all human beings are raised from death and that this was demonstrated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As followers of Christ – as those who are *baptized into Christ Jesus*, we are obligated to teach the world that the God of Heaven came to Earth through Jesus Christ, suffered like us, died like us, and came back to show us that there is a life beyond for us, and that all are welcome, whether they choose to become Christians or not.

The Apostle Paul spoke of God's Kingdom of Heaven in terms of 'the Body of Christ' – to be 'in Christ', so as to avoid clashing with the idea of 'Empire'.

He expected the imminent return of Christ and that this would be the occasion for the resurrection of all those who had died.

The reference to those 'caught up into the air' is generally thought to be the 'rapture' which is to be followed by the events of the Apocalypse and Judgment Day.

We can only speculate about what it all actually means, but the point Paul was making is that we will rejoin our loved ones who died and that Jesus Christ will be with us and with everybody else – whether they like it or not.

A religion based solely on the life to come, would miss out on the here and now; and that would be a very ungrateful attitude to have considering the 'brief and beautiful gift that life is'.

As Christians, we speak of God's Kingdom as something that is already true, 'on Earth as it is in Heaven'.

We have a foot in this world and simultaneously a foot planted in the next – which is not to say we have our heads in the clouds.

If we are to be judged, let it be according to the Golden Rule – keeping in mind that when we do or fail to do something that affects 'the least of these' – those who are most vulnerable, we are also treating Christ this way .

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus criticizes the religious leaders of his day – those who control access to God and therefore, Heaven – in this case.

In the centuries since then, the Church has defined and codified access to Heaven as well as Holy Communion, with regard to who should be accepted.

Such restrictions became a great way to help conquer the world by holding the promise of Heaven hostage to only those who became Christian.

The Church still struggles with this issue of who is acceptable, but as more and more examples of religious intolerance arise, the love of God comes into sharper focus to see with greater contrast.

Willard, p.4

Jesus said that not everyone who said to him, 'Lord, Lord...'
would enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

It would only be those who do the will of God which is simply...
to love.

The Apostle Paul spoke of death as 'sleep';
he was expecting a speedy return of Christ for judgment and
the establishment of his Kingdom on Earth and Heaven,
so, death was seen as a temporary condition.

Christ's return has yet to happen –
though may it be soon, to bring justice and peace.

As Christians, we anticipate the glory of Heaven,
but work for that Beloved Community that is possible in this world.

Jesus gave us plenty of examples of both in his parables
about what the God's Kingdom of Heaven is like.

We need not fear death nor mourn like people who have no hope –
none of us need to fear that.

Friends, we have a faith that has conquered death!

Of all religious people, Christians should be the most joyful –
and therefore, everyone else along with us.

There's a song that put's it all together for me about *who* Jesus Christ really is
and what he accomplished – "The Lord of The Dance"...

I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee;

They would not dance and they wouldn't follow me...

They whipped and they stripped and they hung me on high;

They left me there on a cross to die...

They cut me down and I leapt up high;

I am the Life that'll never, never die.

I'll live in you if you'll live in me.

I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

So Dance then, wherever you may be;

I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

And I'll lead you all wherever you may be;

And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he.

Through it all, we are reassured that those who preceded us in death,
will arise and that we will see them again.

I invite you now to call to mind those whom you have loved who died,
just to spend some time remembering them, and giving thanks.

In silence, let us pray.... May their memory be a blessing to you.

Amen

*Our lesson today from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
includes a reference to the 'rapture' – traditionally interpreted as
the time when the faithful are taken up into heaven.
The Apostle Paul is speaking to concerns about the afterlife...*

- [13] Brothers and sisters,
we want you to know about people who have died
so that you won't mourn like others who don't have any hope.
- [14] Since we believe that Jesus died and rose,
so we also believe that God will bring with him
those who have died in Jesus.
- [15] What we are saying is a message from the Lord:
we who are alive and still around at the Lord's coming
definitely won't go ahead of those who have died.
- [16] This is because the Lord himself
will come down from heaven with the signal of a shout
by the head angel and a blast on God's trumpet.
First, those who are dead in Christ will rise.
- [17] Then, we who are living and still around
will be taken up together with them in the clouds
to meet with the Lord in the air.
That way we will always be with the Lord.
- [18] So encourage each other with these words.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words...

Matthew 23:1-12

[23:1] Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and his disciples,

[2] “The legal experts and the Pharisees
sit on Moses’ seat.

[3] Therefore, you must take care to do everything they say.
But don’t do what they do.

[4] For they tie together heavy packs that are impossible to carry.
They put them on the shoulders of others,
but are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

[5] Everything they do, they do to be noticed by others.
They make extra-wide prayer bands for their arms
and long tassels for their clothes.

[6] They love to sit in places of honor at banquets.

[7] They love to be greeted with honor in the markets
and to be addressed as ‘Rabbi.’

[8] “But you shouldn’t be called Rabbi,
because you have one teacher, and all of you are brothers and sisters.

[9] Don’t call anybody on earth your father,
because you have one Father, who is heavenly.

[10] Don’t be called teacher,
because Christ is your one teacher.

[11] But the one who is greatest among you
will be your servant.

[12] All who lift themselves up will be brought low.
But all who make themselves low will be lifted up.