

Death in the Face of Life – Life in the Face of Death

Luke 6:20-31

Psalm 146

Ephesians 1:3, 7-23

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All Saints Sunday

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So this Senator dies who had conducted himself with less than the highest standards while in office. Arriving at the gates of heaven he is met by St. Peter, who says, "Come on in. But before you settle in we have a little problem. You see, we have high standards around here, and we are not sure what to do with you. Higher Ups say we need to give you a choice. You spend one day in hell and one day in heaven. Then you can choose where to spend eternity." The Senator says, "Well, I've already chosen heaven." "Sorry," says St. Peter, "but rules are rules." So Peter escorts him to the elevator which takes him down, down, down.

At the bottom, the doors to hell open, and the Senator finds himself in the middle of a lush green golf course, and sees the clubhouse in the distance, and all around him his friends and other politicians who worked with him. They are all dressed in evening attire. They greet him warmly, shake hands and reminisce about the good times they had getting rich at the expense of other people. They play a friendly game of golf, and then dine on lobster, caviar, the finest champagne, and dance the night away. The devil presides as the chief host. He could not be more chummy.

Soon, it is time for the Senator to go and spend his day in heaven. They escort him back to the elevator and give him a hearty farewell as the elevator rises. Up at the top St. Peter again greets him and takes him through the gates where he joins a contented group of souls moving from cloud to cloud, playing their harps and singing. They seem to be having a good time, but before he realizes it 24 hours have passed and St. Peter returns.

"Well," he asks what have you decided? You have spent a day in hell and a day in heaven. Which will it be for all eternity?" The Senator says, "Well, I would never have said this before, but I think I prefer hell." So St. Peter escorts him to the elevator and down, down, down he goes.

As the doors open he finds himself standing in the middle of a barren wasteland covered with refuse and filth. The stench is unbearable. His same friends he sees now dressed in rags, picking up trash and putting it in black bags with holes in the bottom as more trash falls down from above. The devil embraces him with a big hug. "But I don't understand," stammered the Senator. "Yesterday it was all golf and a clubhouse and lobster and caviar and champagne. We danced and had a great time. Now it's just a wasteland, full of garbage and misery on all my friends' faces. What happened?"

The devil smiles and says, "Yesterday we were campaigning. Today you voted."

It is not only true of politics. It is true of life before God. Already God has voted for us, elected us to his family, chosen us in his Son Jesus Christ “before the foundation of the world.”ⁱ Now, how do we vote? How do we live our lives in response to all God has done for us? Do we choose to live for momentary pleasures of the vanity parade? Or do we choose to live for eternity, beginning here and now, and look forward to glad reunion with all God’s people who have served him faithfully on earth and now serve him faithfully in heaven?

The vision John sees in his Revelation, used in our call to worship, describes the scene. The faithful departed “stand before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands singing “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!” “Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come”

It is the sort of harps and hymns scene the Senator was not impressed with but that is about the best image scripture offers of life in heaven. And were we to base eternity on that image we might, like the Senator, decide really not our cup of tea. But, of course that is only an image of the sheer joys and innumerable delights of living in God’s presence which we can only imagine, and describe in images. “Listen,” says Paul, “I will tell you a mystery! We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable.”ⁱⁱ

The point is life eternal with God the Father and the Risen Lord Jesus Christ and the vibrant Holy Spirit, is life with its very best, the best of the best, the best you can possibly imagine. And it is all bound up and held together through the Lamb who was slain and raised, Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is about a communion, a unity, a body of people – saints together.

All Saints Sunday is our occasion to take in the bigger picture of life with eternity in perspective, and the communion we share with all the saints who are in heaven and the saints who are on earth. It is an occasion to remember that life is more than what we can see and touch and smell and taste and feel. All Saints is a thin place between heaven and earth, thin as gossamer, where we sense that great crowd of witnesses who surround us, cheering us on from the grandstands of heaven, those who have gone ahead of us, embracing the promises of God. They are our balcony people. Though they are not here sitting in the pews, in a real spiritual sense they are here. Their influence continues as we entrust them to God’s loving care and tender mercies, and as we remember them and the example they set for us, and go on to live with courage, with faith, hope, and love while we are apart for awhile. I heard of one church who on All Saints Sunday, when they read each name of those who died, the congregation replied – “Present.”

Today we especially remember these thirteen saints of South Highland who have gone on ahead, in this past year, and 58 others, parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, beloved family members of South Highlanders who have left this earth for a better shore. God’s children, elected by God, through baptism, who went on to claim

their inheritance in their own faith profession declaring their trust in the Living Christ. All these are surely alive as never before. All these are the saints of God.

Also there are the unknown saints, whose identity, like the Unknown Soldier, is “Known but to God.” And then those who do not know in Jesus Christ as the Solemn Intercession prayer for Good Friday pleads, “Merciful God, creator of the peoples of the earth and lover of souls, have compassion on all who do not know you as you are revealed in your Son Jesus Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ The 2nd Helvetic Confession wisely says – “We are to have a good hope for all.” It continues – “God knows who are his. We must hope well of all and not rashly judge man to be reprobate. And when the Lord was asked whether there were few that should be saved or damned he does not answer, but rather he exhorts everyone to strive to enter the narrow door.”^{iv}

As I think of these thirteen I knew personally here at South Highland, I recognize these were gifted and diverse people. Each unique. Each different. Each dearly loved by God. Here was a great musician who trained thousands of aspiring young singers. There was a wonderful homemaker. Here a score keeper of baseball games who had kept a copy of every Auburn football game program for the last 30 years. There a wise, kind-hearted industrial engineer. There a world renowned medical research doctor who unlocked secrets of the human heart. Over here an international steel executive. Over there again an English professor who helped build a great university. Over there one who trained show dogs. And let’s not forget one who drove her own car into her second century smiling all the way and with perfect 20-20 vision, she received her new driver’s license just after she was called home.

I hesitate to lift up even these few by description, since each had unique and special gifts. Each knew joys and sorrows, experienced hopes and disappointments. Each had a story. Some were distinguished Veterans who served their country with distinction. All were saints, members of Christ’s body. As I hesitate to mention any by description. I hesitate even more to mention any by name, but I take the risk to remind you of one and of his hobby. His hobby seems to me to be a powerful image of that which they have attained, toward which we are striving, an image more powerful than harps or hymns, golf courses or caviar. I mention Charlie Person and his hobby of gliding.

Charlie was an executive with Otis Elevator most of his career. He met Helen up in the mountains of Tennessee and they moved to Birmingham. Charlie was the apple man here at church, because of those wonderful tart apples he bought over from Georgia, every year to share at the Congregational Retreat. He also loved hats. We always knew it was church time when we saw Charlie’s hat resting in the windowsill. Charlie loved to fly. He even got fired from his first job because he was taking flying lessons on his own time and for some reason his employer felt threatened by that.

Well he did just fine in other jobs, and his flying began to focus more on gliders. He learned to glide silently through the air on those lightweight mechanisms that carried him over mountains and fields and streams. His daughter Elaine wrote of her Dad,

“He loved this beautiful planet and its abundant life that God has given to us. He and Mom taught us early to also love the beauty and wonder of this world. We spent a lot of time with them hiking, camping, and learning about plants, animals and birds. He always wanted to fly like a bird – Therefore his keen interest in (gliding) soaring – and bird watching. He taught us especially about these soaring raptors. His favorite was the Swallow Tail Kite! I and my children have even learned to photograph them in-flight to send to him. So if you see that amazing, beautiful, graceful bird, think, “There’s the spirit of Charlie Person.”

Imagine these saints who have crossed the great river to the distant shore soaring over on a glider, like that - crossing a placid body of water to a beautiful lush land on the other side. They have gone ahead of us to claim their inheritance and bid us come to claim ours. And while we do not know what heaven really looks like, and can speak of it only in images, we yet know it is wonderful, a real place, a dimension. We enter through trust in a person. Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection and ascension whereby he has opened the way ahead of us and awaits us and gives us each other right now, fellow saints on earth to begin practicing for life eternal.

You see, if this life is all there is, if we end only rotting in a box in the ground or ashes in a niche, if the promises of God are not true, if the resurrection is not real, for Jesus and for us, then all these hymns and scriptures and prayers, this bread and wine, are foolishness – and folly. But if the resurrection of the body is the substance, the core, the whole of the Christian revelation... not a theological doubt, to be corrected incidentally or even overlooked, as irrelevant but (if the resurrection) (is) what made Christianity^v then we can live confidently knowing that all who die in the Lord are with the Lord. Death that seems so final is revitalized because God’s love is stronger than death. In fact, death is destroyed, and Paul says, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”^{vi} Death has been swallowed up in victory. “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”^{vii} Says poet-preacher John Donne, “One short sleep past, we wake eternally. And Death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die!” We are not alone.

The communion of the saints tells us we are not alone. There is a larger reality all around us than our time and space-limited existence. Even as there are worlds and worlds beyond the farthest known star glimpsed with a telescope and close in worlds within worlds, glimpsed with a microscope – those thin places break through. We glimpse them in a smell, a song, a season, an apple, a glider, a bird, a piece of bread, a sip of wine, or some tangible sign reminding us of ones we have loved and let go, and further reminding us of our own destiny beyond this earth, and of this One who holds all things together.

The communion of saints, our balcony people, cheering us on from the grandstands of heaven, mingling with us here on earth, reminding us we too are saints and can find common ground by moving to higher ground. Some of them were heroes.

Most of them were ordinary whom God made, as Condoleezza Rice called her parents, extraordinary, ordinary people.

We live better, fuller, richer, maybe we live at all, because of what they taught us, passed on to us, and how they loved us. Through the valley of death they all had to go, that same way we also must go, there on the distant shore to be greeted by them and the one who holds us and all things together.

Paul prays that we may be given wisdom and light to recognize this larger, higher dimension beginning here and now. That we may know Jesus Christ in all his fullness, that we may live in hope. That, “with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called us, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.”

“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.”^{viii}

ⁱ Ephesians 1:3

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52

ⁱⁱⁱ “Book of Common Worship, PCUSA”, p. 286.

^{iv} Luke 13:24

^v Karl Barth, The Resurrection of the Body, p.112.

^{vi} Romans 8:39

^{vii} 1 Corinthians 15:57

^{viii} 1 Corinthians 2:9