

For All the Saints

Matthew 22:1-13 I Thessalonians 4:13-18

On the last few Wednesdays, Tammy Rice and I have gone out to the playground late in the afternoon. I take my guitar. We sing songs with the children and read a Bible story.

Last Wednesday I began by asking them what they were on Halloween. “I was a princess...I was a Transformer...a pirate...” and so on around the circle. Then I said “I went as an old man, with gray hair.” One little girl looked up at me very puzzled and said “You mean you went as yourself?”

With that in mind I read this first Thessalonians text with greater attention.

In Leo Tolstoy’s book *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Ivan states that he could grasp the statement from his logic class which said “Caius is a man. Men are mortal. Therefore, Caius is mortal.” Ivan said that it had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself.

Or as one fellow put it, “I knew that all people, sooner or later, will die. But I had thought that in my case, there might be an exception made.”

In our Old Testament class last week, I read from one of the most ancient stories every written down. It is the Gilgamesh Epic of ancient Sumeria. In it Gilgamesh, the king, finds a great friend in Enkidu. But Enkidu is killed in a battle. Gilgamesh mourns and then sets out on a journey to the end of the earth to find Uthapishitim, saying “Him will I seek because I am afraid of death. I will seek him and learn from him the secret of eternal life.”

The most ancient human story written down is about our having to face death.

On this All Saints Sunday each year, we stop to name those who have died since our last All Saints Service. We read their names out loud. We invite members of the family of each one to join us here today. Each name carries with it memories, a face, stories of what they were to us, of what they did while they were here. Each one is connected by love and friendship to this congregation. We read their names out loud both as a way to mourn their dying, and as a way to say thank you to God for their lives among us.

The letter to the Thessalonians is the oldest document in the New Testament. It too addresses the question of death, including our death. In it Paul addresses the topic of believers who have already “fallen asleep”; who have died. He says that we do mourn them, but we do not mourn as those who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and was raised to life. We also believe that when God brings Jesus back again, he will bring with him all who had faith in Jesus before they died.

We do not mourn as those who have no hope, but as people of faith; faith in God through Jesus Christ.

But we do mourn. We do feel the loss of a loved one, a family member, a friend. With Gilgamesh, we want the powers to answer for this absurdity. Why do we live, and then die. Why do we have to say goodbye to loved ones? With Jesus, we weep beside the tomb of our friend Lazarus.

At the death of his dear friend Lazarus, Jesus says to the sister Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. “

The life we have comes from God. The breath we draw into this body at birth is God’s breath, God’s gift. The love of God welcomes us into this world, and places us in families. The love of Christ welcomes us into the church, placing us in the family of faith.

Our time here is limited; our years have a number. For a time, we have work to do, people to love, gifts to share, beauty to enjoy. But the life that God gives through Christ Jesus has no time limit. The love of God for us knows no end.

Like Martha, we weep by the grave of a loved one. Our tears are real, important to us and to God. Jesus also wept over the death of Lazarus.

But these tears are not the last word; Jesus is the last word. And that word is love. That love opens the way to life eternal. It begins now, here, among us – and nothing can stop it, not even the grave can stop it. Nothing can make God give up on us; not even death.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” says the Lord. Believe in me; believe me.

So we mourn, but we also hope.

And we have to decide how we will use the time that we have. Matthew chapter 25 is a collection of three parables on exactly that subject. Each one addresses the issue “Time is limited. Be prepared to meet the Messiah when he comes.”

The setting is the coming of the Messiah, which is often described in terms of a wedding. The Messiah will come back for his bride, the church. And these parables ask the question “Will we be ready? Will we be wise in our preparation or foolish?”

So it says there are ten young women, we might call them bridesmaids. They have dressed for the occasion; they have done their hair. They have come to the place of welcome. They have brought their oil lamps to light the way for the groom as he arrives to meet his bride. They are excited, hopeful, maybe a little giddy on this occasion of joy. But five have come prepared only for a short wait, and five have come prepared to wait as long as it takes.

Now in our time conscious society, we say that a wedding takes place at 5 pm on such and such a day. On several occasions, including my niece’s wedding last summer, I have seen the bride hand her entourage a time table. Be at this place at such and such a time. Be at the church at this

time, be dressed by this time, be in the parlor, and so on. At six minutes to five, the grandmothers and then mothers are seated. At three minutes to five the groom walks into the room, at 5 pm the doors open, all stand and the bride walks in on her father's arm. And that is the way it goes. We are a time conscious people.

But in most of the world, and in most of history, a wedding was set for a day, like Saturday, and it would happen when the groom arrived. If he was a day late, it happened then, and if he was two days late it happened then. Travel was unpredictable. No one could call ahead from a cell phone.

I had a friend who was a mission worker in the Philippines for some time. He said that folk would say, "I will come to see you on Thursday." Which meant they were coming, and you could start looking for them on Thursday, but there was no telling when they would actually arrive.

So in our story, five wise young women are prepared for a long wait. And five have rushed over to welcome the groom, grabbed a lamp on the way out the door, and are not ready when the hour comes. In fact, they miss the groom's arrival, because they have to go back home and look for more oil for the lamps.

When I was a pastor in Charlotte, I often went to funeral services led by African American pastors. Every one of those preachers made the funeral sermon about the living, and not the dead. Every one of them asked us the question "Will you be ready when your time comes? Teach us the number of our days so that we may be wise in their use. The time to repent is now. The time to turn to the Lord is today. Will you be ready when your time comes?" Sometimes they would whisper it, and sometimes they would shout it. But the question was always there.

It is in this parable as well. Are we using our time wisely? Are we prepared for the groom's arrival?

One way or the other we are going to meet the Messiah. Either he will come to us, or we will go to him. The good news is that we have time to get ready.

On this special Sunday we give thanks for all the saints who have gone before us, who now make up that great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on. We commit ourselves again to use our time wisely, compassionately, faithfully, joyfully – until the Lord comes.

Dr. Charlie Summers

For reflection: What is one thing I want to do this week to show that I am ready for the Messiah?

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