

Pentecost 28 Year A 2008

Proper 27

Texts: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Psalm 78

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

“ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may grieve as others do who have no hope.” 1 Thessalonians 13:1

Have you ever had the experience that you found out that you believed something that you didn't even know you believed until that belief was shattered? I did, and I remember being shaken to my core about it. I am amazed at my naiveté when I think about the situation now. St. Paul would about my experience that “the scales fell from my eyes.” I'll just say that I grew up.

When I was a teenager I worked every weekend for three years at St. Mary's hospital. One day in December a gentleman was admitted. Mr. Romano couldn't have been more than 40 and was the father of seven children. Mr. Romano was admitted for abdominal pain that was found to be liver cancer. What was a talkative, friendly man became an uncommunicative, severely depressed gentleman after the diagnosis was made. I don't remember him uttering one word to the nurses or to me after being diagnosed.

I was there on Christmas Eve. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when Mr. Romano died, without any family present. I remember his wife and the children coming in to say their goodbyes before his body was taken to the funeral home. I had seen grief before but not like what I saw in that room all those years ago. It was scary.

As I was sitting in the car next to my dad on the way home that evening it hit me that what was so upsetting was that this man died on Christmas Eve. I never knew people died on Christmas Eve. I realized that I thought that because we were celebrating the birth of our Savior death took a holiday. It was inconceivable to me that this could happen.

I never knew I thought that until that moment in the car. I don't know what upset me more, that the father of seven children had died, or that my preconceived nicely packaged world lay in shreds at my feet like the wadded up tissues my father kept passing me to blow my nose.

The Thessalonians had a similar experience in today's Epistle reading. This was a new community and one of Paul's favorites. In fact, it was to them that he sent this, his very first letter. Paul had converted them from worshipping idols to worshipping Jesus. He wanted to encourage them in their new found faith so he sent Timothy to them to see how they were doing.

Timothy reports that from a faith perspective they were doing well. But there is one area that was of real concern, so much so that the issue became a pastoral crisis that Paul was asked to address.

The Thessalonians believed, as did most of the early Christians, that the second coming of Christ was immanent. It was so close in coming in fact that they thought that none of them would die before that happened. But then the unimaginable happened; some did die. And not only did they die before the Second Coming, they died defending their new faith in the persecutions that had broken out.

What was the community to do now? How could their brothers and sisters who had died participate in the grand homecoming that they believed awaited them as believers? How could those that had died know the Messiah, really know him, if they died before he returned?

Some in the community were grieving with such intensity and were hurting so much that the rest of the community was deeply worried about them. These new believers were experiencing hopelessness surrounding the deaths of those that they loved. First Thessalonians is Paul's pastoral response to them concerning this issue.

Paul writes: "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."

Paul is telling them, "listen closely, this is really, really important. I want you to understand very clearly that because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have a hope that transforms death. We do not need to grieve as if their life, their faith was in vain. We have a hope that transcends life and death, that transforms and transcends the very real grief we feel when someone we love dies."

Paul does not tell them not to grieve. He doesn't wish their grief away in some rational way like their Greek philosophers. He does not offer some pious platitudes or banal bantering that is really only meant to make the one offering them feel better, not the one who is grieving.

Paul recognizes their grief for what it is; a real, heartfelt, to the core pain that those they love are no longer with them. They are deeply afraid that those they love will not have the opportunity to participate in the glorious and joyous events of the Second Coming and they will be lost to them forever.

Paul lets the Thessalonians know that Christ who did not abandon them in life would not abandon their loved ones in death. In fact, at the second coming those who had died will have the place of honor, will be sought first by Christ and then those who are still alive will be brought along to be with God and those they love.

But Paul also offers them something else. He asks that they encourage each other with these words. Paul is placing the grief experience squarely in the center of the community. They will not live alone, they will not die alone, and they will not grieve alone. Our hope is in the risen Christ, and our consolation is in a community that shares the pain of loss and the confusion that questioning that loss sometimes brings.

In remembering standing in that hospital room all those years ago I ask myself, did Mr. Romano's family have that community? Were their burdens shouldered and carried by a community that lived and died in resurrection hope? I wonder.

What about our community? This week is the first anniversary of the deaths of Dick Goyer, Les Crancer and Evelyn Grote. We have also commended to God, Julia Stein Clement, Tippy Holyoak, David Paul, Tom Kelley, Carl Kind, and Jim Thompson. We certainly have had our share of grief in the last year. Is the grief of those left behind that of the community as well? Are we encouraging one another in the hope that is Jesus Christ?

In the next month the clergy of Grace-Kirkwood and myself will be starting a grief support group that will meet here at St. Matthew's.

I have a meeting set up on Wednesday to iron out the particulars. This is open to anyone who has experienced a loss that still weighs heavy on their heart, not just those who lost someone dear in the last year. There will also be in December a special service of remembrance and grieving, again held here at St. Matthew's, to help with preparing for and getting through the holidays. These are being offered as encouragement and consolation that is squarely rooted in the faith community.

Paul does not tell us not to grieve. Paul tells us to share the grief as a community. Paul does not tell us not to question, he tells us to look to each other for consolation in our questioning and in our fear.

Paul is telling us as Christians that in life and death we belong. We belong not only to God but to one another as well, and because we belong we cannot be separated. We cannot be separated by persecution. We cannot be separated by death. We cannot be separated by our questions or our grief. We cannot be separated no matter how long the Second Coming may take.

Above all, Paul tells us to have hope; hope that is born in the knowledge that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, death no longer has the last word. God does.

Amen.