

## Bishop's Convention Sermon

Aloha,

Some are listening to this Convention sermon in church at worship on Sunday, October 17<sup>th</sup>, and others are listening to it online sometime the following week. I'm recording this on Saturday, October 9<sup>th</sup>, a week before the Convention Eucharist will be celebrated in churches throughout the Diocese, and two weeks before the Annual Meeting of Convention.

For those in church, please forgive me, but I am going to read the Epistle lesson again. As you will hear it the basis of my sermon and I want those listening online to understand the context.

A Reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 15, verses 50 to 58

This is what I'm saying, brothers and sisters: Flesh and blood can't inherit God's kingdom. Something that rots can't inherit something that doesn't decay. Listen, I'm telling you a secret: All of us won't die, but we will all be changed— in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the final trumpet. The trumpet will blast, and the dead will be raised with bodies that won't decay, and we will be changed. It's necessary for this rotting body to be clothed with what can't decay, and for the body that is dying to be clothed in what can't die. And when the rotting body has been clothed in what can't decay, and the dying body has been clothed in what can't die, then this statement in scripture will happen:

*Death has been swallowed up by a victory  
Where is your victory, Death?  
Where is your sting, Death?*

Death's sting is sin, and the power of sin is the Law. Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! As a result of all this, my loved brothers and sisters, you must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn't going to be for nothing in the Lord.

Here ends the Reading.

I have a secret listening habit. I delight in Johnny Cash. I especially like the American recordings produced in the late '90's up to his death in 2003. His Gospel songs of this era are important to me. With my ear pods in place, I blare them as I walk.

His song "1 Corinthians 15:55" uses a verse from today's Epistle lesson as the basis of the refrain:

O Death, where is thy sting?  
O Grave, where is thy victory?  
O Life, you are a shining path  
And hope springs eternal, just over the rise  
When I see my redeemer beckoning me



When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he is calling them to task for teaching that there is no resurrection. In doing so, they were close to denying the goodness of all creation. They were dangerously close to saying this flawed and finite body of ours is not worthy of redemption. Religion was a purely spiritual matter, a personal matter, an ethereal matter.

This leads down one of two wayward paths:

Down one: Jesus becomes a great moral teacher. The death and resurrection of Jesus becomes at best a moral example of speaking truth in the face of oppression: A symbol of self-expression and an individual example of nobility. The tragic story of a mystical guru of self-enlightenment on the wrong side of the evil forces of this material world.

More harmful, I think is the other path. It is an otherworldly pious dream of going to heaven. This ignores the challenge of the Gospel to the world. Life becomes a hyper-spiritualized betrayal of the incarnation and the creation. It is all about setting aside the suffering of life in the hopes of heaven.

O Death, where is thy sting?  
O Grave, where is thy victory?  
O Life, you are a shining path  
And hope springs eternal, just over the rise  
When I see my redeemer beckoning me

In 1 Corinthians, Paul places the cross – the death of Jesus --- and the resurrection as the two pillars of faith, as the fundamental themes of Good News of Jesus Christ.

In chapter one, he writes (1:18): “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved.”

Earlier here on Chapter fifteen (15:12-14): “So if the message that is preached says that Christ has been raised from the dead, then how can some of you say, ‘There's no resurrection of the dead’? If there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ hasn't been raised either. If Christ hasn't been raised, then our preaching is useless and your faith is useless.”

For the Christian, Resurrection of the dead holds creation and redemption together. If there is no resurrection, then God has abandoned our bodies – us – and all of creation – the physical world.

The promise of the resurrection of the body makes concrete and confirms God's love for creation: This stuff of life. The resurrection completes creation.

The promise of the resurrection is grounded in the sacredness and the wholeness of creation.

For, us – human beings – it affirms the unity of “spirit, soul and body.” Paul writes at the end of 1 Thessalonians (5:23): “Now, may the God of peace himself cause you to be completely dedicated to him; and may your spirit, soul, and body be kept intact and blameless at our Lord Jesus Christ's coming.”



We are not redeemed from our bodies. Creation is not our enemy. Paul, again, in the Letter to the Romans (8:22-23): “We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free.”

During these days of the Pandemic, many people have frantically tried to deny death. Some have even denied the Pandemic. Others have sought to blame some extrinsic evil – other people, a vast scientific conspiracy, or some grand international cabal with fanciful nonsense about microchips in vaccines. Some have sought short sighted – and even illusionary – autonomy by refusing to wear masks or get vaccinated. Many have let their own fear triumph. They don't know how to sing:

O Death, where is thy sting?  
O Grave, where is thy victory?  
O Life, you are a shining path  
And hope springs eternal, just over the rise  
When I see my redeemer beckoning me

Where there is no hope, there can be no resurrection. There can be no trust. There can be no love. I know that has not been most of you.

We still must ask why?

We are afraid of death. In our modern society, we hide death. I remember the shock of a couple of people when Bea and I took our sons (5 and 7 at the time) to my Mother's funeral and I had them help me throw a handful of dirt on the casket. I remember someone afterwards commenting – behind my back, but in ear shot -- that “children ought not be at funerals, they'll be too frightened.” I didn't agree. Ed and James loved their Grandma. She wasn't just gone, she had died.

It can be made worse by nonsensical words of comfort:

“She's gone to a better place” or “She's with Jesus now.”

We must acknowledge death for what it is. There is separation. There is loss. There is our grief for ourselves. It is something awaiting all of us.

In this broken finite world, all people, institutions, and even nations will die and fade.

This Pandemic has taught all the limitations of life. We are tired.

The promise of the resurrection is that the stuff of this world can be re-formed. Literally, transformed, made new, re-formed.



I increasingly, I don't like the word of "revolution." My study of history suggest to that Revolutions find nothing good or holy in the creation around us as it is – or in us as we are. All must be overthrown. For the revolutionary, humanity must be forcefully changed or those who will not go along destroyed.

Resurrection promises not "revolution," but reformation – RE- FORMATION. A transformation into a new being out of the old. Or as Paul says in 2 Corinthians (5:17): "So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!"

O Death, where is thy sting?  
O Grave, where is thy victory?  
O Life, you are a shining path  
And hope springs eternal, just over the rise  
When I see my redeemer beckoning me

The doctrine of resurrection of the dead affirms the moral significance of life in the body.

We are alive in the here and now. We are living through the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a promise of a future resurrection and judgement. I don't know what that will bring, but we are alive in the here and now. The people and creation matter in the here and now for this is the stuff of the new creation.

My hero, St. Francis of Assisi would sing in his Canticle to the Creatures: "Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape."

The language here seems very different than Paul's casting of death as the "enemy."

I think the intend is actually closer than one might think.

Death is a reality of life. This Pandemic has reminded us of our limits. We must grieve for those who have died. We are also grieving a changed reality. Our loss of old security and our illusion of self-sufficiency. We have life and therefore we are reminded that there is also death.

If resurrection is tied to creation, then we are confident that God will be present in our lives, in this world, in the here and now, whether with us or without us. In your life and in your death. In my life and in my death.

This reality of faith should give us both confidence and courage to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to God's work – to God's love and justice, even in the face of danger and opposition, for we know that what we do is finally valued by God. We are promised that with resurrection comes holy and righteous judgement.

So, Paul told us at the end of today's Epistle lesson (1 Corinthians 15:57-58): "Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! As a result of all this, my loved



brothers and sisters, you must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn't going to be for nothing in the Lord.”

And what is the work of the Lord?

In basic form, I think the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31) from Jesus Christ: “The most important one [Commandment] is Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these.”

The work of the Lord is love, and now it is our labor too.

You and I will mourn what has been lost: loved ones and friends. We often have not been able to gather to say goodbye, We will remember that we grieve for ourselves. As we put away grief and sadness, we must move on to be about the work of God: To share God's love, to welcome others into the Body of Christ, to spread the Good News of Christ with our family members and neighbors, to feed the hungry, to visit prisoners and those who are sick, to cry with those who are mourning, to shout out for justice and peace, to care for all of creation. All in the here and now. We have no fear. We are promised resurrection – re-formation – of all creation including you and me.

O Death, where is thy sting?  
O Grave, where is thy victory?  
O Life, you are a shining path  
And hope springs eternal, just over the rise  
When I see my redeemer beckoning me

Next year, God willing, we will be all together. Until then God has much for us – the living – to do. There is a whole world that needs to be reminded of God's love.

Let us pray.

O loving Creator, we are alive this day. We know not what the future will bring but help us be ready and without fear for whatever might be. If we must stand up for truth and justice – for you – help us to do so with love and courage. If we must sit still, help us to listen attentively and without judgement. If we must wait for answers, let us do so patiently as we seek your will. If for today we must do nothing, let us do it with intention and gallantly. We are alive today, gracious One, take all anxiety from us, make these words more than words, and give us the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus. Amen.

