

Sermon: Year C, 6 Epiphany
Texts: Jeremiah 17:5-10
I Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-30

I did a quick calculation a few days ago, and realized that, to date, I have officiated at well over 200 burials. That's more funerals than most people experience in a lifetime – slightly more than one a month on average. And one can't help but be changed by living so close to the tearing away of individuals, one by one. Yet I would contend that if you want to know about life, if you want to understand what it means to be a person, you don't have to travel the world or flirt with the edges of tragedy engaging, as some do, in extreme activities. All you need do is regularly attend the Episcopal Burial service.

It's hard to find words when someone dies, an expression beyond the usual condolences, the benign phrases we all use. But being stymied is deeply appropriate. Because words create. Words accomplish things. Words breathe. Before anything else, they signify life itself. They are of God. Before the world has taken shape, in the first chapter of the Bible, this primacy of words is established. God speaks, and, only following after his words, everything comes into being. So it is, then, that at the very moment when we feel most profoundly the silence of our words having been stolen away, before anything else, words are spoken. The burial rite begins with sentences – not groans or cries or the stillness of stoic observance, but a series of astonishing declarations that, each in their way, boldly contradict everything visible. Three things are said, which, by means much experience, I have come to believe, surpass in efficiency and hope almost all other utterances available to us. With every repetition I have learned to love them more.

The first is the most audacious, a statement that bears no hint of nagging question, doubt, or even nuance. "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord" it proclaims, "he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die." In the space of two short clauses, all the hard reality of death, so plainly evident, is reduced, first to the subjunctive mood, and then declared to be completely otherwise. We are, in essence, informed that what we see is not true. That's an immensely courageous first step, especially when it is made without explanation or apology.

The second set of sentences comes from the book of Job. They are more intimate. Originating from out of all the horrific calamities that Job has suffered, his words give voice to a still more resilient trust. "I know," he states, "that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though this body be destroyed," he jabs, "yet shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold... and not as a stranger." Job insists that he will not be duped. God will not betray or abandon him. Regardless of all degradation, regardless of demise, he will see God and God will see him, and they will recognize one another. Job's justification will be his complete restoration. And once again we are informed, this time deep within the realm of human anguish and yearning, that what is true is contrary to all appearances. There is no talk of closure here. Closure would be the black victory of despair. There is only an adamant confidence in disclosure – revelation and restoration are yet to come, not in ending but in completion.

The third and last sequence hones in even closer to home. They are the words of Paul, and, in comparison with his usual rhetoric, his words are surprisingly clear. Being so close to us, they seem the least daring. But over time, saying these words about the death friends and strangers, parishioners, persons who reached old age and children, of whom none were insignificant, I have come to think of these sentences as being the most inviting and engaging – and in a compelling manner, the most apparent in life. “None of us,” Paul wrote, “lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. If we live, we live unto the Lord; and if we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live, therefore, or die,” he concluded, “we are the Lord’s.” There is no place in life, said Paul, where we are truly independent. And just so, there is no space in death where we are deserted and left to nothing. Life is not just personal function, our having distinct, working biological mass. Life is relation and connection, our intrinsic and vital co-laboring within the vast expanse of creation’s time and the intricate web of creation’s many systems. And dying is not simply our falling to the inevitability of decomposition. It is our becoming wholly dependent again on the re-creative word of God, our waiting to discover what God will bring forth in new words and new commands that, when spoken, will reconstitute what in his covenant he has promised to keep – which is us.

Before five minutes have passed in a burial service, all these things are declared, and all the rest that follows in prayers and readings, in eulogies and commendations, serves only to give sharper distinction to these several, marvelous pronouncements. Funerals can never be merely pro forma, recitations that are made regardless of who has died. I have presided at services where one person was in attendance and where five hundred have come, but always, without a single exception, each service has marked the humbling beauty of one’s life contributing to all life and life’s being made rich by the great plurality of individuals brought into God’s union, which stretches beyond our words into the mystery of eternity. There is no room in this service for tired platitudes or hollow words that offer nothing but resignation. What is spoken is privilege, gift, and undying expectation. What is declared, without irony, is the substance of life and the glory of God in a bond that God refuses to allow to be broken.

In a very similar way, the text we have heard this morning from Luke’s Gospel makes a complementary declaration. We are given first a reiteration of the beatitudes, which we know best from Matthew’s recording of the Sermon on the Mount. And, as in Matthew, these initial verses offer us an invitation to a certain form of life. Blessedness comes from discretion and discipline. Unlike Matthew, however, Luke does not leave this invitation open-ended. It’s followed immediately by a series of stern warnings. “Woe to you,” says Jesus, and with this, we are suddenly put in a position that demands decision. Luke puts us on notice, drifting is not an option, for not deciding puts us at risk. Right away this choice seems to set us against the divide that threatens us most. It’s easy to take this passage as one that announces our judgment; we will receive either reward or punishment. One way of living earns grace, the other, condemnation, and thus, we are put on edge. This interpretation, however, is well wide of the mark, for these warnings do not merely forewarn, projecting a possible future penalty. They declare something in present time. And thus, what they truly state is what kind of living is actually a form of dying, in comparison with the way of being that leads to flourishing.

And the distinction is clear. We die in life when we choose to live insulated from others, comfortably wrapped in our own desires and designs. We die in life when, little by little, we

choose repeatedly to make ourselves our own world. We can exist lavishly and still be grossly pathetic figures, as the news made evident again this week. We can have everything and more but be little more than nothing. That can be our small, pitiable life. Or, we can pursue a different fullness, which comes by progressively trusting words that aren't our own, and with unusual confidence choosing to live without hard borders, with the conviction that in every imaginable way, we are not our own. Our life is truly found in the expansive providence of God and in our integration with all others. So, said Jesus, we are free to love our enemies and bless those who curse us. We are entrusted to do good to those who hate us and pray for those who abuse us. Turning the other cheek is not noxious obligation, but a sign of life's victory in God. The difficult question is, how far are our lives from these words.

All you really need to know is found on one page in our Prayer Book, where, at the very point of death, God, and we, speak of life. No one lives unto himself. No one dies unto himself. God's word is stronger than our multiple failures. Find a prayer book this week and read these statements every day. Pray them. Stop working and collecting and doing and gathering and ponder for a change: page 469. Nothing will remain the same, for every smallness will obtain infinite value – and that is life.

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