

Series: The Words of Jesus (Public Teachings)
Today: Words on Death and the Hope of Heaven
Text: Matthew 22:23-33

A Meditation preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, November 2, 2008 (All Saints' Day)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

This has been a very busy year when it comes to funerals and memorial services here at First Presbyterian Church. There are forty-four candles on the chancel this morning. Each of those candles represents the life of someone who was not only special to God, special to the life of the family members they left behind, and to the life of this church. Now I can just imagine the engineers and the mathematicians in this congregation counting the names in the bulletin to be sure I am right. You will find only forty-three names on our insert. The extra candle is to represent the death of a loved one who was not part of our church but whose loss still has an impact on you.

A colleague of mine is fond of saying, *"In the army of the Lord, all the soldiers are wounded."* Most of us, if not all of us, have felt the sting of death at some time in our lives. There have been times in this past year when it has seemed that death would not take a holiday. At those times I have asked the proverbial question, "Why?" Why so many? Why so many friends who are dear to us and to the life of this church?

There has been no answer, and I guess I really didn't expect one, but in the absence of a clear answer, I have taken comfort in the experience of a young artist named Asher Lev in Chaim Potok's book by the same name. Here is what young Asher says:—

"I drew the way my father looked at a bird, laying near the curb near our home. Is it dead," I asked.

"Yes," he said in a sad and distant way.

“Why did it die?”

“Everything that lives must die, Asher.”

Everything? And you too, Papa, and Mama? And Me?”

“Yes.”

“I could not grasp it. I forced myself to look at the bird. Everything alive would one day be as still as that bird. ‘Why?’” I asked.

“Because that’s the way the Ribono Shel Olom made his world, Asher.”

“Why?” I asked.

“So life would be precious, Asher. Something that is yours forever is never precious.”

Death reminds us that life is precious, and we are given only so many moments in life to live so that we must make the most of each moment we have. Death also reminds us of God’s design for the human body. As another friend of mine once observed when I was questioning the reason for the death of a mutual friend of ours: *“Make no mistake about it, Randy. God means to kill us all.”*

So what do the words teach us about death and the hope of life after death? Our text this morning takes place during the week of the death of Jesus. It is the same day that the Pharisees had tried to trap Jesus on paying taxes. The other political party in Judaism, the Sadducees, has come to him with a trick question about marriage in heaven. By Mosaic Law it was the responsibility of the brothers in the family to take care of each other’s wives should anything happen to the brother. Since the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, they ask him a question about the Law if seven brothers all died after caring for the first brother’s wife. Who is she married to when she gets to heaven?

Jesus responds that the premise of the question is wrong for it assumes that heaven will be just like earth. To this Jesus says no. Heaven is different from earth. He tells them there will be new and different relationships, relationships different in character from what we know on earth; relationships which will far transcend the physical relationships which are most important to us while we are limited by time and space. These relationships will be more satisfying than the best relationships we can imagine while limited to this time and space we now know.

As your pastor, one of the things I regularly hear from those who are dying and from those who are grieving is conversation about what happens after we die. One of the statements I hear most often goes something like this: *“If I could only be sure that Charlie or Suzie was going to be all right (or is all right), I think I could let them go.”*

The answer to the question is in the words of Jesus about whether or not the ones are all right when they leave this life. He points them to scripture in the book of Exodus when God was speaking to Moses and calling him to lead the people of Israel from slavery to freedom. There God says, “I am the God of your father, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Not I was, but I am. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob still live with me. I am who I am, and you will be with me when death comes.

This is our promise as Christians. Death will not have the final word. The God who created us and redeems us by the blood of Jesus Christ has promised us that we will be in his presence in a new way when death ends our physical life on earth. We will not be alone. We shall join the saints who have gone before us and we shall continue to cheer for the ones we leave behind. In the words of Hebrews 12: *“Surrounded as we are by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that would trip us up or hold*

us back and let us run with perseverance the race that has been set before us looking to Jesus who is the author and finisher of our faith.” In death, we are not alone! This is the good news which Jesus shares with the Sadducees.

One of the books I read this summer is a wonderful little novel by William Young called The Shack. It had a marvelous way of breaking through my intellectualizations of things like the Trinity and the afterlife to show me a more relational understanding of what these concepts mean.

The Shack is a story of healing of a man who blames himself for his daughter’s kidnap, rape and murder. He cannot forgive himself for having left her alone for only a few moments, and so he keeps an appointment with God at a shack in the woods where he is drawn into a relationship with the Trinity. God the Father is an African-American woman. Jesus is a Middle-Eastern man. And the Holy Spirit is a Far-Eastern woman.

There is a scene in The Shack which was very helpful for me to understand this concept of heaven. Mack, the man who cannot forgive himself, has been taken through an exercise to understand that what happened was not his fault. And at that moment he is given the privilege of seeing his murdered daughter laughing and playing with other children. Let me read just a few paragraphs for you which meant so much to me:

“Can I get to her? Maybe just one hug and a kiss?” Mack begged quietly.

“No, this is the way she wanted it.”

“She wanted it this way?”

“Yes. She is a very wise child, our Missy. I am especially fond of her. “

“Are you sure she knows I am here?”

“Yes, I am sure. She has been very excited for this day, to play with her brothers and sister, and to be near you. She very much would have liked her mother to be here too, but that will wait for another time.”

Mack turned to the woman (Sophia). *“Are my other children really here?”*

“They are here, but they aren’t. Only Missy is truly here. The others are dreaming and each will have a vague memory, but none fully or completely. This is a very peaceful time of sleep for each of them....”

“....Just then someone called Missy’s name and Mack recognized the voice. She shrieked with delight and started to run back toward the others. Abruptly, she stopped and ran back to her daddy. She made a big embrace as if she were hugging him, and, with eyes closed, over exaggerated a kiss. From behind the barrier he hugged her back. For a moment she stood completely still, as if knowing she was giving him a gift for his memory, waved, turned, and raced back to the others.”

“And now Mack could clearly see the voice that had called his Missy. It was Jesus playing in the midst of his children. Without hesitation, Missy leaped into his arms. He swung her around twice before putting her back on her feet, and then everyone laughed before hunting for smooth stones to skip across the surface of the lake. The voicing of their joy was a symphony to Mack’s ears, and as he watched, his tears flowed freely.” (from The Shack by William Young, pp. 167-168)

What dawned on me after I had read those paragraphs is that the pain of grief is for those who are left behind, not for the one who has gone on ahead. The promise of scripture is that what lies ahead is filled with more love than we can possibly imagine. If we are lucky, we taste it here in this life with our life partners, but if not, the love that

will surround us after our death is so overwhelming that we would never desire to be anywhere else. Our loved ones may want us back because they are lonely, but if they truly love us, they will go through the pain of grief and let us go to be fully present with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This is the promise of Jesus about the world that is to come. It will be filled with love and we will be surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses who will be cheering for us from the grandstands (Hebrews 12). We will not be alone! Jesus himself will be our host.

I cannot prove any of what I have told you this morning. It is what Jesus said, but it is a statement of faith for me because I have not been there to know, without a doubt, that it is true. However, what I can tell you is that I have experienced the faith of the 43 people whose lives we honor today as they have died, and what they have taught me is that there is nothing to fear as we pass from this life into the one that is to come. One day my candle will be among the ones we light here; my wife's candle, my children's candle. One day your candle will be here, as well. What testimony will your life give? Is death frightening to you, or is all a part of the way we are designed by God? If that is so, are we willing to trust that what God designed on earth, God can also design in heaven? Our task, while here on earth, is to let our light so shine here on earth as brightly as it will shine one day in heaven allowing us to say, *Thanks be to God who gives us the final victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.* Amen.