

10-28-2007, All Saints Sunday  
Chapelwood UMC, Lake Jackson

It's Worth It All  
Luke 6:20-23

In Brenham I had a choir director who was a college professor and was working on his PhD in choral directing. He was raised in Spring, and his parents still lived there. One day we got word that his father had died suddenly of a heart attack. Of course, it was a shock to this young man, as well as his whole family. After talking with his mother, he came to me and asked me if I would do his father's service. He said, "Before you say yes, you need to know that my father belonged to a branch of Judaism that does not believe in life after death." Well, I agreed to do the service.

It was a difficult service for me. For the first time in my ministry I could not give the family any word of hope. I could only speak of the life he had lived and assure them that his influence would live on in them. I could not lead them to celebrate his enjoying the reward of living his life well. I could not speak to them of the joys of living forever in the presence of God. I could not offer them the consolation of knowing that they would be reunited with him some day. By the end of the service I was filled with an emptiness. And I was more glad than ever that I am a Christian and that we have the assurance of eternal life.

What a difference it makes.

All Saints Day is set aside to remember the people we love who have completed their journey through this life. There is a sadness to this day. I am thinking of my father, my grandparents, a cousin. I am thinking of some friends. Of course, I am thinking of people for whom I had the honor of being their pastor. You are also thinking of people you loved who are gone. You can't help but remember them with sadness. We miss them.

However, it's a very different kind of sadness than my choir director's family was experiencing.

I remember when my grandmother died, my grandfather quoted Paul, who wrote, "But 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." (1 Thessalonians 4:13) Granddaddy, who was a very religious man, told us, "Don't grieve for your grandmother. She's in a better place." Well, I tried not to, but I couldn't help it. Neither could my grandfather. Although he would never admit he was grieving, he sunk pretty low for the next year or so. I knew I was grieving, and I thought there was something wrong with me, that my faith wasn't strong enough, or something. After all, grandmother was in heaven, why should I feel sad.

I was very grateful for my Pastoral Care and Counseling professor in seminary, when he addressed this scripture. He said, "When Paul said, 'Grieve not, as those who have no hope,' he was not saying, 'Don't grieve.' He was saying, 'Don't grieve in the same way as those who have no hope.'"

There is a difference. My choir director and his family were experiencing the grief of a people who had no hope. As I spent that afternoon with them, I felt their grief. It was a very different kind of grief than we experience.

Our grief is transformed by the joy of knowing that the lives of the people we love are not over. They have simply moved to another and higher and better level of life. We have that assurance, not just because somebody said it was true, but because Jesus demonstrated the truth of it to us. When Jesus arose from the tomb on Easter Sunday, he made a statement more powerful than any words could express. He transformed the tomb from a symbol of hopelessness into the empty tomb, which is the symbol of the victory of life over death.

There is a reward waiting for us. Knowing that makes all the difference. It helps us endure the tough times. And there are tough times.

Jesus was certainly aware of how difficult life can be. When we think of the Beatitudes, we usually think of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, which starts out with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." The Beatitudes in Matthew are all similar. They talk about our internal spiritual struggles, and they tell us that if we are willing to engage in those struggles, we will be blessed.

What many forget is that the Gospel of Luke has another version of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain. Now, that's not "plane" like an airplane. It's "plain" like on level ground. Luke tells us that Jesus came down from a night of prayer on a mountain to place with level ground and began to teach the crowd gathered around him. And he started out with the Beatitudes, just as he did in the Sermon on the Mount. However, it is a different version of the Beatitudes. He doesn't say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," or "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." He simply says, "Blessed are the poor," and "Blessed are the hungry;" "Blessed are those who weep." Blessed are those who are hated and excluded and reviled and defamed because of their steadfast faithfulness to Christ.

Jesus was saying that life can be and often is hard. And being a Christian can be and often is even harder. He tells us there are two paths we can choose from. There is the broad, easy road, and there is the straight, narrow road. The straight and narrow road is hard. However, Christ promises us that if are willing to choose that path in life, remaining faithful to Christ, living as he taught us to live, speaking the truth and doing what is right, there will be a great reward waiting for us.

The reward will be that the poor will be rich, not in money, which has no power to satisfy, but rich in the wealth of the eternal kingdom of heaven, possessing all the fruits of the Spirit in great abundance: Love, joy, peace and so on; Rich in dwelling in the glory, love and life-giving Spirit of God, dwelling in eternal light; Rich in friends and loved ones who will never be taken from us.

The reward will be that the hungry will eat deeply of the Eternal Word of God. They will never be hungry again, in body or in soul.

The reward will be that the tears of those who weep will be turned into laughter. They will be so full of joy that their laughter will never cease.

The reward will be that those who have been hated and reviled will be praised by the hosts of heaven. They will be recognized as heroes for the ages to come.

I guess I would sum it up by simply saying, eternal joy is waiting for us if we are willing to bear the troubles of faithful Christian living in this lifetime.

Today we are remembering those who have already entered into that joy. As we think of Bettie, Mary Louise, Noel and Jim, picture them leaping for joy and laughing.

As you think of the others for whom you lit candles or lifted up prayers of remembrance, let the curtain that separates us be removed for just a moment. Glance into heaven and see them enjoying their reward. See their joy. Hear their laughter.

Laughter is contagious. Let their laughter infect you. Be filled with their joy. When you do, the sadness slowly fades away. Certainly we still miss them. But it is a different kind of missing. It is no longer the missing of someone who has left us, never to be seen again. It is the missing of someone who has gone ahead of us and is waiting for us to join him or her.

When we listen to the laughter of the saints, we are reminded that life was difficult for them one time too. But no longer.

There is no need to feel overwhelmed when life is hard. The hard times cannot crush us if we just remember, "This too will pass." The day will come when we will join the saints in an everlasting celebration, as we receive our reward.

Someday we will look back upon this life with all its trials and tribulations and we will say, "It was worth it all."

Do you doubt it? Then listen to the laughter of the saints.

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