



MINISTER
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32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Hopeful Sorrow

Intro: Our New Testament reading comes from I Thessalonians. This letter addresses some specific concerns raised by a young church started by Paul. Paul had been teaching that Christ would return soon and carry everyone up into heaven. Paul, and many early Christians thought that they would live to see this, that they would be there for the completion of God's Kingdom. Now members have died and so the question arose "what will happen to those who have died before Christ comes again?" Let us listen for God's word as it comes to us.

This past Monday night the same scene was played over and over again. The door bell would ring, unknown little people dressed in strange costumes thrust open bags at me, presenting me with a choice, give them something pleasant, or I would receive from them' some unknown. but probably not so pleasant surprise. "Trick or treat" they would each shout with such great enthusiasm. Halloween is a fun, yet strange celebration.

Looking into Halloween's history- it is an ancient Druid celebration that

Christians once tried to take over. It started out perhaps 1600 years ago, as the "festival of Samhain". The Celts would celebrate the beginning of their new year, November 1, by building bonfires, and offering prayers to those who had died throughout the previous year. They believed that the souls of these departed friends and family members spent New Year's Eve being judged as to what form they would take for the next year. On November 1, they traveled to their new bodies.

Christian missionaries to the British Isles

quickly took over this particular celebration transforming it into "All Saints Day" or "All Hallows' Day" claiming it as a holy day to commemorate the lives of all the saints in the church who have no special calendar day of their own. It was also a day to recognize the individual Christians within every congregation who have died in the last year.

All of Halloween's truly strange traditions -disguising ourselves in costumes, welcoming strangers at the door with treats, keeping special vigils with jack-o-lantern lights, stem from an ancient need for humans to recognize and greet the certainty of death, and yet somehow keep its powers at bay. Halloween has always been the attempt to understand and to some degree exert some control over the awesome power of death. WE can't understand it fully, so it does scare us.

Of course we all recognize the reality of death. From early on in our lives we become aware of it as part of life. But it makes all the difference in the world if it's happening to you or someone you love. Not all of us are dealing with the reality of death and dying right now. And thank God for that. Some of us are fortunate that we ourselves, and members of our families are fine and healthy. And we proceed in life with a sense of immunity. That death is not going to happen to us, at least not for a long time so we can speak freely,

casually, even philosophically about death, because it is a reality that is not very real to some of us right now.

For some of us, death is a cold and pervasive fog that drifts in and grips our souls and robs us of life. For those who mourn the death of a loved one, for those who know the end of their life is near, life is suddenly and radically changed, so many of the things we thought were important may become insignificant.

Death and dying, it makes all the difference in the world if it's happening to you or to some that you love. That's the situation in the book today, of Thessalonians. Christians in the first century, who were expecting the risen Christ to come soon, to usher in his kingdom with all of its glory and triumph, these Christians were suddenly confused because other people in their church were beginning to die. They didn't know what to make of it. And it confused their faith and it gave them concern as to what Easter really meant. They had thought the resurrection had destroyed death. And they would now see Christ coming on the clouds, but with the death of their loved ones they are unsure.

Few things can challenge faith and hope like the painful reality of death. Amy Tan, author of the Joy Luck Club, writes from the perspective of a daughter who is telling some of her mother's story. In one section of that story she tells how

tragedy and death had so challenged her mother's faith. The daughter says as proof of her mother's faith she used to carry a small leatherette bible to the first Chinese Baptist church every Sunday. But later as my mother has lost her faith in God that leatherette bible wound up wedged under one short table leg - a way for her to correct the imbalances of life. It had been there for twenty years.

What had happened twenty years before for this mother was that her son named Bing had fallen into the ocean and drown. And the very next day this mother goes back to the beach believing she would receive her son back alive again. She takes with her a thermos of sweet tea, and she pours it into the ocean as if somehow pleasing the ocean would somehow bring back her son. And then she takes a beautiful sapphire ring that her mother had given her when she had died and she throws it into the water hoping to somehow effect some kind of cosmic exchange. But her son is never found. And her mother stops carrying her bible. Twenty years later, her wound is still fresh as hope and grief wrestle together under this table leg, which is too short. The daughter finishes her story saying I lift the table and slide the bible out; I put the bible on the table flipping through the pages because I know it's there. On the page before the New Testament begins there is a section called deaths, and that's where she wrote Bing's name lightly in erasable pencil.

Before the reality of death, faith can stumble and falter, and even get wedged under the table leg that is too short in some attempt to correct the injustices and imbalances of life. But for the people of God there is always the hope there. Even if the hope is only that the names of those who have died are written in lightly in erasable pencil. Between doubt and hope we wrestle with the reality of death.

That's what was perplexing these Thessalonians, in a post resurrection world. Paul says two things. The first thing is we sorrow; obviously, yet how many people say I have to be strong, I cannot break down I have can't ask questions. Resurrection doesn't mean that death has somehow disappeared, that death is now our friend, what it means is that death has been defeated. But that the fullness of that defeat is not yet complete. And so we sorrow.

The Bible says in the presence of death we sorrow. But the other thing that Paul says is that though we sorrow it is not as those who have no hope. Hopeful sorrow, the resurrection says, though death may grasp us, it will not hold us forever. Hope is what helps hold our sorrow, it does not replace it, it does not cancel it, but it under grids it. The pain of death can never cut so deeply as the grace of God in our lives. Hopeful sorrow, the conviction that there is more to life and death than what is seen. That when the kingdom is complete we will

all be together.

Paul says we will be with the Lord forever. Honest grief, hopeful sorrow is what helps keep us from giving in to despair. We sorrow, but not as those who have no hope. We are to encourage one another. And encourage each other to be saints.

Paul is the first to say we are called to be saints. There may be no simpler way to describe our Christian vocation. "Saint" is an identity, not a title. Saints are saints because they belong to others, because they are trying to be whole human beings, and because they trust in One who is beyond them. We are about to experience what is called the "communion of saints." The role of those who died in the past year will be read and in a mysterious way those saints will participate in communion with us.

The ancient Celtic festival of Samhain supposedly included a tradition that still speaks clearly about the power of sharing and facing together the reality of death. According to legend, as each family came to the communal bonfire

On the eve of Samhain, they brought with them the final coal from each of their own hearths. Combining these coals they would start a huge warming fire. At the conclusion of the night, after spending the evening telling stories about the ones who had passed away

during the previous year, the participants would allow the bonfire to slowly die down.

When nothing was left but a few glowing coals, each family would gather one of the embers and carry it home. There that single coal from the community bonfire would be used to restart the family peat fire and the New Year slowly dawned. It was a new day, a new winter, but it would be warmed by the memories of loved ones long past.

So it is with all saints day, that triumphs over All Hallows eve. Amen.