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Year A
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WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION

1 THESSALONIANS 2:9-13

May what do here each and every Sunday bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Language like “witness” and “resurrection” is enough to evoke discomfort. Witnessing is something that evangelicals do not. More Light Presbyterians. Still, Scripture not only calls us “to witness,” it calls us “witnesses.” Which is more threatening: being a noun or being a verb?

In our faith tradition, a funeral is called A Service of Witness to the Resurrection. This language intimidates some and is off-putting to others. When one is traveling through the darkest stages of grief, God-speak is not always welcomed, and yet God is always there even when the person whose physical death we are grieving is not.

Death is a subject with which Americans are uncomfortable, and maybe that is because here in the United States, we glamorize youth rather than venerate age. Somebody you know and loved has died. Somebody I know and loved has died, and you know what? You and I are going to die.

Notice that the vocabulary I am using here is the language of death: death, dying, died. Forgive me if this language feels too clinical or cold. To me, it is the most pastoral language available. It is confrontational yet comforting. It speaks a truth that is difficult to accept, and it equips us to start looking beyond death to the hope of resurrection that we all have in Christ Jesus.

The next time that you read the obituaries in the newspaper, please note how afraid of this language our culture has become. If I did not know any better, I would think that nobody dies anymore. They merely “pass away” or “or go to be with Jesus.” Taken literally, this language suggests that the

dearly departed has floated down a stream (and thus all we have to do is raft after them) or that the person who has “gone to be with Jesus” will be back from wherever it is that Jesus has taken him or her.

The river metaphor is beautiful. I find it incredibly helpful, because it infuses a spirit of peace into a world of fear. If experience has taught me anything, it is that there are fates worse than death. The problem with the river metaphor is that it side-steps---if not boldly denies---the grim reality of death. Yes, it is possible to die “a good death” (not everybody has one, and we will revisit this subject during Lent); but this does not change the fact that our bodies betray us, and through this betrayal, God is faithful still.

Yesterday, the church celebrated/marked/observed All Saints’ Day, and thus, today, we commemorate All Saints’ Sunday at UPC. Again, language is problematic. In this service, we are not celebrating death but life. We honor our catholic heritage by marking All Saints’ Day, even though our observance of this occasion blurs the historic distinction between All Saints’ and All Souls’ Day, because in the Reformed tradition, everybody is a saint...and everybody is a sinner (and, as John Whitehead pointed out so astutely in Tuesday’s lectionary Bible study, the difference between saint and sinner is that saints know that they sinners).

Do you think of yourself as a saint? What about the person sitting beside you? Hmm...which comes more naturally to you: recognizing saintliness in yourself or in your neighbor? There may be a correlation between the two. Self-loathing leads to hypercriticism. Self-love engenders confidence, and confidence deepens one’s capacity to love.

The beginning of the excerpt from 1 Thessalonians reads like an obituary: “Remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day.” Almost every obituary that I have ever read says something about what the dearly departed did professionally. How that person labored and toiled helps us to honor his or her memory. It often captures our attention and helps us to begin answering legacy-related questions.

Even though obituaries are written after death, the truth is that our obituaries are works in progress. We write them every day by what we say, by what we do and by the company that we keep. Our labor and toil is defined by what we stand “for” and by what we stand “against.” Our legacies are set in stone by what we choose to reveal and by what we choose to conceal.

For whom will you be voting on Tuesday? Why? Are you afraid of being judged by your neighbors if you told them which causes you are championing? Do not worry. You will be. By now, you know me well enough to know that I enjoy discussing religion and politics with any and everybody, and because of this, I know that somebody I know well will be relocating to Canada soon. At least one person has told me if Obama wins, he is moving to Canada, and more than one person has informed me that they will be moving to Canada if McCain is elected. Lydia and I will win either way, because we will be able to visit Canada without having to pay for a hotel.

Paul is definitely worried about how he will be remembered. He is writing to protect his legacy: “You, you Thessalonians are witnesses, and God also (notice that the church is cited first). You are witnesses of how, pure, upright and blameless our conduct was toward you believers.” Paul seems to be saying in parentheses, “Write that down so no one will forget. Our time in Thessalonica has passed, and I pray that our work there was not in vain.”

No, this is not a formal obituary, but the writer is definitely referring to a former life, one that he or she lived among the Thessalonians. On this All Saints’ Sunday, one of the most death-saturated services of the liturgical year, it occurs to me that the books of the Bible attributed to Paul are among the most grief-saturated in the New Testament. The early church is deeply acquainted with grief. They commune with martyrs. They remember crucifixion, and thanks be to God, they witness---and are witnesses to---resurrection.

On Wednesday, I had the privilege to watch a video of Cornel West’s recent lecture at the University of Alabama. I made an effort to be there in person but was turned away with hundreds of

others, because there was no room in the inn. So I took advantage of the next best thing: a video of his presentation (and now I know where the Ferguson Theater is).

West, an Ivy League philosopher who is the grandson of a black Baptist minister from Tulsa, Oklahoma, said this about education: Education is about dying. It is about dying to ignorance and injustice and being resurrected in knowledge and justice. This death is painful. We pass through stages of grief, but until we die, it is impossible to live.

West is an authority on race relations in the United States and seemed to enjoy riffing on Alabama's history. He started with Socrates, traveled through the wisdom of Christianity, celebrated African American contributions to philosophy and the arts before arriving at the maxim: Embrace particularity. Yes, we are all human beings, and yet it is how we go about being human that enriches the experience. Do not pretend that one is not white or black or male or female or straight or gay or lesbian or transgendered or bisexual or queer. Embrace particularity.

Paul seems to understand: "As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father (or mother) with his (or her) children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into this kingdom and glory." Parents embrace children in their particularity. At least I hope that they do. Parents who know their children, parents who urge, encourage and plead with their children, appreciate them for who they are. To know one's son or daughter is to love him or her. No, I know this is not the case with every parent, but I pray that it will be.

All Saints' Sunday is not only about remembering those who have died in the faith but also about looking ahead. It is about imagining ourselves into God's vision for the world. When we observe the Sacrament of communion, when we give thanks for God's love for us in Jesus Christ, we do so with the church universal, with the church past, present and future. Today, when we pray the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving during the Eucharist, we will give thanks for those who have died in the past year, and I cannot help but believe that, as we do this, they will be giving thanks for us.

Maybe Paul's word will belong to them: "We...constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers." God's word is at work in love, in Christ's love for us, in our love for our neighbors and in our neighbors love for us.

The church triumphant is the church transparent. We see God through their faithfulness, as we pray that future generations will see God through ours. When we look through them, what will we see? When others look through us, what will they see? May it be God's vision of the world through our particularity; may it engender an ascription of praise as profound as this one from the Book of Revelation, one of the appointed texts for All Saints' Day: "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels and around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!'" Amen, indeed.