

GOING HOME

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Camrose United Church
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Romans 8:31-35, 37-39 - Nothing will separate us from the love of God

John 14:1-3 - I go to prepare a place for you

Revelation 21:1-4 - The vision of a new heaven and earth

Today's message is in the subject of death. The Christian tradition at its best offers us a way of embracing death that is not spooky or fearsome, and that's one of the most important things for us as Christians to remember, and to remember again and again.

What I'm really going to do today is one of the things I like to do which is read poetry, and I'm going to do that in my favourite way which is to read it with someone else. Last summer, Hazel Naslund shared with me some poetry that I had never seen before-- one of the most beautiful poems about death. What I'm going to do by way of the message is just a preface to the poem because the poem is really the sermon in itself.

I picked some readings from the New Testament that relate to death, but as I did I realized there is a great distance between the way we regard death and some of the things that are said about death in the New Testament. There has been a lot of change, evolution, down through the centuries of Christian history, and I want to get to the place where we can listen to this poem which paints one of the most beautiful pictures of death. I want us to be able to listen to it in a way that is not shackled by the "Oh, but what if, and uh-uh, and I'm not sure, etc., etc., etc."--all those things that get in our way. So in a way I'm now talking about the things that get in our way of embracing death in a purely trusting and Christian and fearless way.

One of the first difficulties that always emerges is the sense of judgement that is associated with death. It seems to me that most of us don't really believe that; rather that at the time of death we're welcomed into God's arms lovingly. Yet when we look at the New Testament, some of the references about death speak more about a judgement day. Death for many people has therefore been a frightening moment because it is the moment of judgement, and if we're not convinced that we've lived a good enough life we then become deeply wary of death. And although most of us don't believe that, I know there is something deep in our hearts that nevertheless feels it because I've sensed that when I've been with someone near the end of life and the guilt, remorse, and anguish comes up. What is needed pastorally is to take that person through into the assurance of forgiveness.

I think that's what Paul is saying in this reading from Romans. What can separate us from the love of Christ if God is on our side? He's talking about death as well as all the other things that we can imagine would separate us from the love of God. This takes us back to Paul's theme again and again that this is not about deserving, earning, or being good enough. Rather, it's about God's unconditional love that we need only receive, to which we need only open our hearts and embrace. So what Paul is doing is talking to these early Christians who are still struggling with the question of death and all the

anguish that's around the notion of judgement. He is dispelling that for them--they don't need to be concerned about judgement. As in life, forgiveness is there to let us step beyond the fear of judgement. So if we set aside the notion of judgement because of the gospel's central message of forgiveness, we are then able to embrace death without the fear of judgement.

Another of the distractions in our understanding of death is the sense of the resurrection at the end of the age when all the souls will be raised together. That's very different from the way we think of death now. We think of death and resurrection as a very individual thing. We picture someone who dies being welcomed into the household of God at the moment of death, one at a time, individually; not this collective notion of all souls rising at the end of the age. Now the church has struggled with that throughout the centuries. In the medieval years the Catholic Church worked with the doctrine of purgatory which means that a person who died would go into this in-between state rather than to heaven immediately. Other people would pray for and make sacrifices for that person, and go on and on and on trying to do what they could to help that soul, this loved one, in purgatory make it to heaven. With the Reformation and Martin Luther's rediscovery of Paul's beautiful doctrine of forgiveness, all that in-between time was swept away

Some of us have philosophical or metaphysical minds and have some trouble with the idea of contemplating whether the resurrection is of everybody at one time or of each person one at a time. (This is philosophical, so if you don't think that way just skip this part.) You see, what we are talking about is eternity. That's beyond time, beyond space. So when we ask questions like "When do we go to heaven?" or "Where is heaven?" we have to understand those are all metaphorical questions that come from within our limited thinking. We can think only in terms of time and space which is the world in which we live. We can't think beyond time and space. But that's what eternity is; there is no time. So the question whether we are all raised at the same time or one at a time, is actually a meaningless question in the context of eternity. (All right, the non-metaphysical people can now return to our discussion!)

The point I'm trying to make is that in some of the writings of the New Testament we get the picture of a moment of judgement and this collective resurrection at the end of the age. We really need to let go of that. We have let go of that. We don't understand death. Death is a deep paradox. In John's gospel Jesus says "Even though one dies, yet shall he live, and those who live and believe in me will never die." So in the space of two verses he said those who die will never die. He said "we die" and "we don't die." We don't resolve that paradox; we just recognize the paradox as the way one talks when we speak about something beyond the range of this world's rational understanding.

So at funerals people sometimes use sentimental poems that say we don't die; our loved one has not died. I used to have trouble with that, and I used to avoid that because I thought it was an unhealthy denial of death. We need to face death, we need to say "yes, our loved one has died," and then move on from that. But I've come to realize that both are true--we die and we don't die. In a sense we live beyond death instantly. It's not immortality of the soul. That's the wisdom of Socrates and ancient Greek philosophy. Christian belief in resurrection is not immortality of the soul; it is death, we do die. The Christian belief is just laid alongside the notion that we don't die. We don't

have to resolve that paradox. I think it's another one of the puzzles that distracts us around death--we do die and we don't. "We do die" means we don't need to be afraid of death. We can say "death"; we don't have to use euphemisms. And "we don't die," means we live eternally in God's loving embrace.

I wear the black. I didn't used to; I always wore white stoles at funerals because I thought white symbolizes life and resurrection and that's what we want to emphasize. And then I realized we do that only because we're afraid of the dark, and rightfully so. It used to be that funerals were black and morbid in tone. But there's another, a transformed, understanding of the black--that of the darkness as friendly. I remember one of my children, when he was very little, waking up in the night afraid of the dark. I remember one night when his fear was dispelled with the help of a beautiful story that teaches children to experience the darkness as friendly, as surrounding and embracing and holding us close in a friendly, loving sort of way. And it was such a marvellous transformation when he moved from being afraid of the dark to being welcoming of the darkness. And that's what the black is for me now. We stop treating black and darkness as morbid, and we embrace it as also the place where God comes to us and embraces us. And then we can face that moment of the dying of the light without fear; not only without fear but with the sense of the warmth and the loving, caring presence. And so I wear black when I talk about death because that's where Christianity takes us. It takes us to that place where we can be with the darkness with as much a sense of divine presence and care and love as we can in the light.

A couple of times in my career as a minister I've had a question sprung on me from a child. You know the sort of thing when parents get questions that are too hard for them, and they bring their six year old along, catching the minister off guard and telling the child "Go ask him, ask him your question." And the little one says, for example, "Where do we go when we die? What happens?" Those are moments when I don't flash to my theological books and try to remember the answer. I simply open my heart to the spirit and ask "What do I say, what is the truth for me?" And the truth for me is "I don't know." And to me that is one of the most powerful liberating statements of faith there is. This child is afraid of the unknown, and thinks there is some horrible truth, or something very complicated, that he or she is not being told. The parents are afraid to say they don't know. But to say "I don't know" says not only that I don't know; but because I've read the books, went to the college, and did the degree, there must be many others out there, even ones who write books, who don't know. And that's the truth. That's the truth, and the child's parents don't know. But the truth is we don't need to know the details about death. And so I tell that child not only that I don't know but also that I don't need to know because I trust God. It's that "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." And that's all I need to know--that God stays with me as through life in death and life beyond death, and I need only to trust. And it's beautiful watching a child say "ahhh, okay, that's a relief."

But then it opens up to something much more beautiful. We've got all kinds of pictures and stories about heaven--streets paved with gold, angels and the wings--and we don't have to go off on metaphysical speculation about that asking "How do we know this, and how we know that, and if it's like this how can it be like that," and all that

analytical stuff. It's pure imagination, and we can set our imaginations free to draw all the beautiful stories and write all the wonderful poems that we can think of about heaven and about life beyond this life, and they don't have to fit together logically because they are just beautiful imagination. But the imagination comes from the soul, from the heart. And each of them has something of the truth that God has planted in our souls. Every imagination about heaven contains something of the truth, about life beyond this life. So the child then comes alive, and because children are great they can say "Okay, I'm just going to make up a picture of heaven and draw it," and there it is--their beautiful picture of heaven. And they can then appreciate all the wonderful pictures throughout the history of art, all the beautiful pictures that are in the Bible like this one from Revelation: "Then I saw a vision of a new heaven and a new earth." And that's one of the most beautiful pictures, but it's just one of ten thousand wonderful pictures of heaven.

I want now to introduce the picture, the poetic picture that Hazel and I are looking forward to sharing with you today. This comes from quite a different background culturally, so it helps us shift our view. It's a poem written by James Weldon Johnson who was born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871. He was a teacher, lawyer, songwriter, poet, novelist, journalist, but in this connection most importantly he was one of the leaders of what was called the New Negro Movement or the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's in the New York areas of Greenwich Village and Harlem. The poem we're going to read to you is from one of his best known collections and a classic of American literature entitled "God's Trombones," published in 1927. The poem is entitled "Go Down Death."

[Hazel Naslund came to the lectern microphone:] "I just wanted to say that last summer Jim and I discovered that we both have a deep love of poetry, and in the course of a conversation we had I told him about this poem that I had read over forty years ago. At the time I was so moved by it that I thought when I die I want this read at my funeral. And so I shared the poem with Jim and told him how I felt. When he phoned me last week about reading it here today I was a little taken aback. This certainly isn't my funeral! And I thought maybe the poem was a bit too gloomy. But Jim convinced me, and he has convinced me even more by what he has said today, that it's not too gloomy and is a wonderful piece of poetry for us to think about and to absorb. The other interesting thing that struck me is that I'm wearing black, too. We didn't get together on that."

Go Down Death

James Weldon Johnson

Weep not, weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.
Heart-broken husband — weep no more;
Grief-stricken son — weep no more;
Left-lonesome daughter — weep no more;
She's only just gone home.

Day before yesterday morning,
God was looking down from his great, high heaven,
Looking down on all his children,
And his eye fell on Sister Caroline,
Tossing on her bed of pain.
And God's big heart was touched with pity,
With the everlasting pity.

And God sat back on his throne,
And he commanded that tall, bright angel standing at his right hand:
Call me Death!
And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
That broke like a clap of thunder:
Call Death! — Call Death!
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
Till it reached away back to that shadowy place,
Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.

And Death heard the summons,
And he leaped on his fastest horse,
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.
Up the golden street Death galloped,
And the hoofs of his horse struck fire from the gold,
But they didn't make no sound.
Up Death rode to the Great White Throne,
And waited for God's command.

And God said: Go down, Death, go down,
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,
Down in Yamacraw,
And find Sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
She's laboured long in my vineyard,
And she's tired —
She's weary —
Go down, Death, and bring her to me.

And Death didn't say a word,
But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse,
And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides
And out and down he rode,
Through heaven's pearly gates,
Past suns and moons and stars;
On Death rode,
And the foam from his horse was like a comet in the sky;
On Death rode,
Leaving the lightning's flash behind;
Straight on down he came.

While we were watching round her bed,
She turned her eyes and looked away,
She saw what we couldn't see;
She saw Old Death. She saw Old Death
Coming like a falling star.
But Death didn't frighten Sister Caroline;
He looked to her like a welcome friend.
And she whispered to us: I'm going home,
And she smiled and closed her eyes.

And Death took her up like a baby,
And she lay in his icy arms,
But she didn't feel no chill.
And Death began to ride again —
Up beyond the evening star,
Out beyond the morning star,
Into the glittering light of glory,
On to the Great White Throne.
And there he laid Sister Caroline
On the loving breast of Jesus.

And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,
And he smoothed the furrows from her face,
And the angels sang a little song,
And Jesus rocked her in his arms,
And kept a-saying: Take your rest,
Take your rest, take your rest.

Weep not — weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor