

Sermon for Trinity                  Epiphany 6, 2019

"For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished...But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."

I've been moved over the years by Paul's letters to the Corinthians. In them, Paul wrestles with challenges very much like those occurring in the church today. In fact, I think these letters should come with a package warning. The warning should read something like this: These letters were written for those who already believe, not for non-believers. These letters were not intended for novice believers.

Why the warning? Think back with me to two Sundays past when many of us watched the Super Bowl. A hundred million watched the game. It's a distinctly American pastime, feasting on the Super Bowl. I watched a news cast where curious immigrants, looking to better understand what it means to be an American, took a class on how to watch the game. Do you realize how hard it is to watch the game if you don't know the why, or how, or what for? What's a downfield block? A cornerback? And off-tackle run? If you think that's hard to explain to the uninitiated, explain why Americans eat nearly a billion spicy chicken wings on that day! You've got to be able to talk the talk at least a bit to get anything out of the game.

Something very similar occurs in this letter to the Corinthians. Paul makes this obviously logical, but circular argument, that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, we have no hope. We're stuck. We don't know what to do. But if Christ has been raised, we have everything to hope for. The end of Paul's thinking depends on the beginning, and the beginning depends on the ending. To the uninitiated, that's not A+ work.

Let me begin by saying that there's multiple reasons why Paul might have written these words to the Corinthian church, some of them for the Corinthians, some for us. If we were to only deal with Paul's argument in today's thinking, we'd have significant challenges. We live in a time when all truth claims are either subject to scientific proof, or the facts are simply ignored. Talk about the Resurrection is not like talk about climate change; either the Resurrection happened, or it didn't. Either a man rose from the dead that one time or he didn't. Either God won the victory over our enemy death or God did not. That's Paul's thinking in modern language.

Of course, Paul wasn't trying to sway the scientifically informed. He'd already shared the truth about the risen Christ appearing to the Apostles, to five hundred people and even to him. What the Corinthian church did have to contend with was the Resurrection's detractors. Reading between the lines of Paul's letter, we can see there were at least two troublesome groups. We see one group of church members who didn't care about the Resurrection because they had already been saved. Sound familiar? These so-called believers had no fear of death because they believed they could not die. Having been saved by Christ, they were immune from the troubles of the world around them.

Still another, larger group, didn't care about the Resurrection because they didn't believe in death in the first place. We are, to their minds, essentially spiritual beings confined to a corrupt body. When the body fails, the spiritual being continues. Death is not "real" in the sense that everything comes to an end. The human spirit continues. When they comforted their friends, whose loved ones had died, they told their friends to ignore the death for life had already gone on. Doesn't that sound familiar?

What we must realize is that Paul doesn't hope to change the mind of those who've never heard of the Resurrection. No, what Paul wants to deal with is the *reason* for the Resurrection. Paul cares about the finality of death and how that finality has shaped our Christian hearts. The Resurrection lies at the core of Paul's belief, at the heart of his message.

I don't believe we're very conscious of death in our daily lives. If anything, we seek to avoid thinking about it. Death, and here I don't put the point too finely, is a downer. But the truth is, whether we're conscious of death or not, death is omnipresent to us. Sometimes death crashes into our life with the death of a loved one or of a friend. Sometimes, it's just a nagging reminder that all those creaky pains of ours are hints that we are not going to age-on forever. Whatever the case, Paul is calling on Christians to live a life that flies in the face of death, to live life affirming lives and not death confirming.

And that brings us to Paul's key point. Most other people's arguments about the death tend to point to future questions. A big question is: What will happen when we die? Apparently, as we will hear from Paul in a week or two, that was a problem for the Corinthians too. If we come back in some bodily form from the dead, will I still have this nose? This waistline? Will I finally learn how to play the piano? Paul will later gently answer the Corinthians that we will come back in bodily form but not one we would recognize.

What Paul is most concerned about is how either ignoring death or fearing death shapes and forms our thinking in the here and now. Bottom line, Paul wants us

to live a life unafraid of death. Even though those Corinthian groups want to ignore death, it's planted directly in their path. Even if we want to dismiss the Resurrection on scientific terms, death remains. At the very core of creation, death works on life like a worm in an apple. But as Paul reminds us in another letter, death does not have its way, not now, not always, not forever. Paul wrote that there's nothing in all creation, whether above or below or in the here and now that can stand between us and the God who loves us. Even creation itself cries out to be restored to God. Why? Because God, the God who created and loves us, intervened on our behalf, and on behalf of the entire creation, to defeat death.

How does all that really matter? A few weeks ago, death crashed into our family's life when our friend, Tim, died. Tim was a remarkable Christian man. Like many believers, Tim realized you can't persuade people to be Christians by rational principles or by arguing them into a corner. Tim knew, as we all need to know, that from the time of Paul until now, the only way you can convince people to believe is to point to people who live their belief. Point to people who lead Christian lives. If we thought like some of the Corinthians, we could hunker down and act as if Tim's death never really happened. Forget about it. Or we could say to ourselves as other Corinthians did, "There, there, everything turns out right in the end; Tim's spiritual being will live on." Or instead, we could learn from Tim's example. Tim, the deeply devout man, put death to flight in the here and now. Tim would tell you, if you want to defeat death, be more generous than you think you should be. If you want to share in God's life affirming love, be kinder than you feel is called for. Tim would tell you, if you want to share in the love of the Risen Christ, be more of a friend than you think you should be. Pray always, and death, death will be put to flight. Death has already lost. Is there life after death? Absolutely, and we can learn to act on it here and now. Amen.

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