

Columbarium Dedication, Sept. 2018, Psalm 116

Martin Luther, our forebear in faith, wrote the following line in one of his less cheerful moments: “Even as we live each day, death our life embraces.” Those words took on fresh meaning for me this past week at my text study meeting on Wednesday morning. Our friend and colleague, Pastor Jeremiah Knabe from First Presbyterian Church in Duluth, had a traumatic first hand encounter with sudden death. His congregation had recently hired an intern pastor, a British man named Andrew Smith, who was in his early 50s. Andrew was helping Pastor Jeremiah with something in the church the previous morning, when he just slumped over and died, apparently from a heart attack. My friend has first responder training, but neither he nor the ambulance crew could revive Andrew. One minute he was here, present among us, the living; the next he was dead, no longer in that alive-on-earth -club in which we all hold current membership. My clergy friend was shocked and grieved, and who can blame him? Any death is a reminder of our mortality, but sudden and unexpected deaths are especially intense in that way. We are shocked out of our complacency and reminded that we never know what the next day, hour, or moment may hold for us. It’s unsettling, to say the least. The comfort for Pastor Jeremiah comes in his faith, in God, from the community of faith that supports him, and from the rituals that will now happen---a funeral, a burial, the sharing of memories with others grieving Andrew Smith’s death. All of those things matter immensely at times when we are vulnerable and grief stricken. Luther is correct as he acknowledges the reality: “Even as we live each day, death our life embraces.”

This past week we had a shared national moment of remembering, and of acknowledgement of how suddenly and unexpectedly death may come. This last Tuesday was the 17th anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001. Thousands of people died that day without the least warning or expectation of doom. They had work to do, plans for supper, families to care for; but their lives were abruptly cut short. I thought about that on Tuesday, and I’m guessing most of you did, too. My thoughts turned towards the 9/11

Memorial I saw at the Pentagon just last April when we visited there. Right outside of the Pentagon building on the side where the plane crashed into and through the wall, there is a simple and elegant memorial built along the lines of the trajectory of the crashing plane. For each one who died, there is a bench with a small reflecting pool beneath it, and their name on the end of the bench. Understated and terribly moving. Even when we visited last spring, there were flowers floating in some of the reflecting pools; I can only imagine each pool was filled with flowers on this past Tuesday. Must have been something to see. It is so important that we remember and honor the dead, even as we proclaim our faith in a risen Lord who gifts us with eternity. Like the ritual of a funeral and burial, such memorials and remembrances express our reverence for life and our honoring of the dead.

In Houston County, Minnesota, in the southeastern portion of our state, there is a small, white country church, Southridge United Methodist Church. It is built on land donated by my great-great grandfather, Frederick Burow, a civil war veteran, a farmer, and a man of faith. His wife, Emilie Freischmidt Burow, played the piano for church services, once the church was built. There is a stained glass window in this little white church that bears a dedication to Frederick. And there is a country church graveyard outside the church. Within this graveyard is a marker to Frederick and Emilie, including their names and dates, along with the verse from 2nd Timothy 4:7: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” I never met either Frederick or Emilie, yet I feel a connection with them. And, I am so touched that they are buried next to this church which meant so much to them, so that in death, they remain connected to what was so important to them in life: their faith and their community of faith. They are not forgotten, they are remembered.

We are following in footsteps like Southridge Methodist Church and countless other churches through centuries and millennia of faith, as we dedicate our Columbarium this morning. Our columbarium is the 21st C. equivalent of their 19th C. church graveyard. Which would have been the

equivalent of the 1st. C. catacombs, presumably. It was 9 years and 1 week ago that we dedicated our unique Memorial Garden. Our intention was to create a space of beauty and peace, for reflection, remembering, and worship. That has happened. Now we dedicate our Columbarium, furthering that notion of the sacred value of remembering and honoring--and of acknowledging the connection between life and death, between the living and the dead; as Luther said, "even as we live each day, death our life embraces."

Think of two connections between life and death, between the past and present that are right in front of us this morning. The first involves our altar flowers. Our flowers are donated by Carmen Beardsley in memory of her great grandmother Petra Wedlund. There's an old time name for us to remember; Petra, married to Clarence. She had a pet bird she absolutely adored. I would swear she sewed clothes for it—is that right? So that's the kind of colorful woman that Petra was! Her granddaughter, Carmen, and her great grandson, Connor, still add spice and color to our church, all these years later. The second connection involves our altar rail. Who will receive his First Communion today? Torvald Skadberg. There have been Skadberg's in this community and this church for generations and generations. Torvald bears a family name. He will commune at the same altar rail as his parents, his brother, and his forebears in faith. That line between the past and the present, between the dead and the living; it is a thinner, finer line, than we may realize. To me, the presence of our columbarium recognizes that in God's kingdom, the past, present, and future are held in a single piece; and that the circle of the living and the dead, is, indeed unbroken, as the old spiritual asks. "Will the circle be unbroken? By and by, Lord, by and by." The only way we could possibly have improved upon our columbarium is if it would have been possible---which it was not---to build it right behind the altar wall of the church. Then that circle of saints, the communion of saints that we speak of on the other half of the semi circular altar rail, would have been given a concrete expression. The concept still holds true, however, and the setting in which our columbarium stands seems to me to be just right.

Now, typically, as people of faith, we focus on life rather than death, and rightly so. We often reflect on the signs of life all around us---the inevitable coming of spring each year, the dawn that always follows each night, the birth of each new child, the butterflies that emerge from the cocoon, and so forth. It is true that signs of life surround us, and I, for one, am all for focusing on them. But, it is equally true that signs of death surround us, too---the inevitable coming of winter each year, the night that finishes off each day, the inevitable decay of living things which we see in autumn, the death of people we know or hear of. At times, we experience grief and sorrow over the reality of death, which is entirely appropriate. But here's an interesting thing---I don't generally find cemeteries to be depressing. Particularly those of the old white church with graveyard style. They seem to me to be peaceful and full of history and interest. Likewise, our Memorial Garden and Columbarium do not seem somber or grim to me at all---they seem lovely, serene, peaceful, *hopeful* even. And perhaps that's because God's undying love for us, whether in this life or the next, brings us that hope of resurrected life. Which turns what would be simply depressing into a sign of promise. And Christ's defeat of death and the devil, through his death and resurrection, changes everything, including how we understand death and life and resurrection. They are woven together, through the love of God, and we are visually reminded of that in the way our Church, Memorial Garden, and Columbarium come together.

Our Psalm this morning, Psalm 116, doesn't get a lot of coverage in our typical 3 year lectionary, but it's appearance on this particular day for our church and purposes is certainly providential. Because in this psalm, we also see life and death and hope all intertwined in close proximity. It seems this psalm was written by someone who had a close brush with death, possibly through illness, and was healed after prayers to God for help. Not all of us have had a parallel experience, but some of us likely have. He describes the sense of being targeted by illness, almost hunted down by death, saying, "the snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of death laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish." But out of that anguish came his prayer, as he writes, "I called on the name of the Lord, O Lord, I pray, save me."

He was, in fact saved, and so declares, "Gracious is the Lord; our God is merciful." Gratitude is everywhere throughout this sacred poetry; the writer weaves together his desperate plight, his prayers for help, and his gratitude for deliverance throughout this psalm. And he includes this profound line, "I walk before the Lord in the land of the living." A better translation to express the continuing action of the verb "walk", would be "*I am walking* before the Lord in the land of the living." Which is what all of us are doing. We are walking before the Lord on this side of the grave, the land of the living. And our lives are an ongoing journey, a hike of faith in progress that continues as long as we live. But we walk, not alone, but before the Lord.

There's another deeply comforting verse a few verses later. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones." I find that so rich and consoling a thought. Sometimes it seems quite obvious that our deaths are precious in God's sight; my Mom's death, after years of dementia, was for me almost mysteriously drenched with peace and angelic presence; I believe without much strain that her death was precious in God's sight. You may have sat at such deathbeds also. But other deaths seem so different and would test our faith in that idea; whether such deaths are sudden, untimely, violent, or seemingly one of too many to even noticed by anyone, including God, we may then struggle to recognize that each life and death are sacred in God's eyes. And yet they are. If not even a sparrow falls to the ground without God's knowledge, as Christ assures us in the Gospels, then how much more is that true for us? And we are assured right here: "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones." So, yes, Intern Andrew Smith died abruptly and unexpectedly 5 days ago; but his death is precious in God's eyes. 17 years ago, thousands died tragically and suddenly in the Twin Towers and in the Pentagon and in a field in Pennsylvania, but their deaths were precious in God's eyes. There are mass graves of holocaust victims, of genocide victims, of civil war soldiers---but their deaths were precious in God's eyes. God creates life, reveres life, honors death, and resurrects life. We ought to do the same; revere life, respect death, honor those who have died, trust in resurrection.

This psalm ends on a note of praise and thanksgiving, which seems so appropriate for this time and place. September on the North Shore of Lake Superior in the Village of Knife River can be just about as good as it gets, right? The mountain ash berries, the birds crowding at the feeders, the ripe apples and tomatoes, the sunny days and mild nights. Life is good. We can affirm that. God is good. We affirm that also. Death is sad, but it does not have the final word. Because God continues to be about life and goodness, even in the passage between death and resurrection. “I will offer to you a thanksgiving offering”, we read in the psalm. “I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all the people, in the courts of the house of the Lord. Praise the Lord!” That is our attitude as we are walking before the Lord in the land of the living. But it is also our attitude as we stand at the grave, facing our death or that of others. We grieve, yes, but we also hope. We also trust. Because we believe in a God who makes all things new. A Lord of resurrection. A God who brings life even out of death. As one of the songs for funerals in our hymnals puts it: “All of us go down to the dust. But even at the grave we sing our song: Alleluia!” Amen.