

“Abundant Life”

Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle

November 4, 2018

All Saints Sunday

Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

The reaction of Jesus to the death of Lazarus his friend realizes the reality of death. He mourns it, he is angered by it, he rejects it. Death, of course, is inevitable. Its pain, its loss, its cause for anger is all true and real – especially when it comes amidst conditions such as with the deaths of the eleven children of God at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh last Saturday, and so many others over the last several years. The operative commandment in the world today is “hate thy neighbor.” The worth of the “other” is being assessed consistently and completely outside of God’s mandates. As with Jesus and Lazarus, it is incredibly sad, it is infuriating, and it is totally unacceptable. It is difficult to accept death in any case, but we do, because death is a part of life - but not this, not again. We reject it, in the name of Jesus.

We don’t have the power of Jesus to raise them from the dead – not the children or the teenagers in their classrooms, the shoppers at the mall, the theatre goers, the club goers and the concert goers, the worshippers in their churches, or elderly Jews praying in their temple. As Dara Horn wrote in the NY Times yesterday, “The people murdered in Pittsburgh were mostly old, because the old are the pillars of Jewish life. They are the ones who come to synagogue first (the prayer service before the Torah service), the ones who know the prayers by heart. The oldest victim was Rose Mullinger, 97.”

We do not have the power to raise them. The only power we have is to live – not just to live, but to live abundantly, the life that Jesus came to give us. It is not our power alone, but the power of God within us. The power of God is love, for God is love. The perpetrators of such evil as we are seeing are enabled by the purveyors of fear. Perfect love casts out fear. We are not capable of perfect love, but God is. But we can grow in our love, must grow in our love, as we give ourselves to God’s love and our neighbor’s needs. We are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, all our minds and all our strength, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Every other commandment, Jesus says, falls under these. The shooters hate themselves, which allows them to hate others.

We have life, but we only know we have it is because we live it. We can live small or we can live large. Love enlarges life, and fear keeps life small. Life abundant is life lived large. Jimmy Carter said recently (from John Wesley), “My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can, with whatever I have to try to make a difference.” There is

no one among us here this morning who cannot do the same. No matter where we are in life, the mistakes or bad decisions we might have made along the way, the regrets we might have – for each one of us the future, however long or short it might be, whatever the conditions or situations we might find ourselves in – we have the power to choose life and to reject the power of death.

Life abundant is living large within the kingdom, the movement, of God. It is living with, living for, and living toward.

Living With

Life is relational. In a sense, we are our relationships. I can only know who I am in relation to others. We need each other in order to be who we are, and who we are depends on whom we are in relation. Who we are becoming – and we are all becoming – is who we are becoming together, while still maintaining our integrity and individuality. Life abundant is life with others, life in community. It is recognizing the power each of us has to impact and influence the lives of others. Within the Christian community we acknowledge that together we are the body of Christ. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” (1 Corinthians 12:22) When some hurt, we all hurt. We rejoice in one another’s joys, and share one another’s burdens. Our differences are celebrated, reflecting the diversity we see in God’s image. Abundant life is life together. We pray together, sing together, and serve together. You cannot be a Christian alone.

I remember when I was first consciously and seriously drawn and called to the Christian life, which was way before I felt called to the ministry – I was deeply influenced by the idea and reality of Christian community – life shared, life with others in the company of Christ. The New Testament word is *koinonia* – fellowship. I remember having this (admittedly naïve) image of the church as a community where no one would have to have insurance policies, because everyone would simply agree to take care of one another! Some years ago, when we were considering whether or not to install an elevator here at Pebble Hill, there was some disagreement about whether we really needed one. I remember saying to a couple of folks that we wouldn’t need it if we agreed to carry people up and down the stairs to fellowship hall or the choir loft when we needed to. I was only half kidding. Abundant life is life with, life together.

Living For

And life abundant is life for – life for others, as Jesus was “the man for others.” All others. He is the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for his sheep. We live in this constant state of

“inbetweenness” – the certainness of death but also how to live the most of life here and now – how to give witness to the resurrection without it dismissing the reality of death in our midst here and now. Believing that loving our neighbors is never for the sake of eternal life after death, but always because it is a means by which death itself is overcome, here and now. It is the means by which we fight off death every day and we are able to see the saint in all. Without this mandate, this principle, we allow death to infringe on our lives prematurely. We allow death to have its way with us, to have a say before it should. Without this mandate we allow death to determine a way of being and becoming in the world that keeps life small, a way that has acquiesced to a matter of “factness,” to “the way things are” – which inevitably prevents the power of the kingdom of God, indeed the presence of God, in our midst. We allow death to have more power than resurrection.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is for us to realize that resurrection is not just our future promise but our present reality. Loving the neighbor and Jesus as the resurrection and the life are synonymous claims. Resurrection here and now, what Jesus promises to Martha, means that life, and life abundantly for all, is what is at stake. It is so very easy to postpone abundant life to life after death. The life of the saints is now. The life of saints is that which we witness; lives lived as saints is what we are called to do, to be, to become. The movement of the gospel in our lives makes it impossible for us to substitute heaven’s rewards for earth’s demands.

Madeline L’Engle tells the story of a good man who dies and goes to heaven, and who is welcomed at the pearly gates, which are thrown open for him to enter. He goes through them in a daze of bliss, because it is everything he has been taught, golden streets, milk and alabaster and honey and golden harps. He wanders the streets lost in happiness, until after a while he realizes that he is all alone; he hasn’t seen anybody at all. He walks and walks, and he sees nobody.

So he goes back to the gates, and he asks, "Peter?"

"Yes, my son?"

"This really is heaven?"

"Oh, yes, my son. Don't you like it?"

"Oh, it's just wonderful! But where is everybody? Where are the prophets? Where is the Holy Family? Where are the saints?"

Peter looks at him kindly. "Oh, them? They're all down in hell, ministering to the damned. If you'd like to join them, I'll show you the way."

Living Toward

And life abundant is living toward. None of us could live meaningfully or even happily if we didn’t have things to look forward to. It can be as simple as looking forward to getting home

after a long day's work and putting our feet up, or the anticipation of a visit from the kids or an old friend, an upcoming holiday or a vacation, or adding something new to our life. Life moves us forward, and what moves it forward meaningfully is the anticipation of occasions or experiences that will bring happiness, even joy.

That may suffice, for a time, maybe for a long time, maybe for a whole lifetime – enough in short-term to short-term to occupy us and engage us in life within the circle of our own concerns, our own happiness, our own. . . But the life of faith, life that is abundant, is lived within a larger vision, a broader anticipation. We are bold enough to claim a vision of a world, in Isaiah's words, "where the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines . . . when he will swallow up death forever . . . will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth." And John's vision in Revelation, of "a new heaven and a new earth, for the first things had passed away . . . " a heaven and an earth where "(God) himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

"Without a vision, the people perish," says the scripture. It both calls us, lures us, and compels us, as we give ourselves to it. Like any vision, it is not guaranteed. God is not waiting for the right time to bring it about, but is present with us even now to fulfill it. We make it real within us and among us as we move toward it in faith.

May God's abundant love continue to move us toward what is not yet, filling our days with hope. May the abundant Christ accompany us in the way that is truth and life. May life abundant – shared with others, lived for others – be realized in our daily walk. May we be renewed in that walk, choosing life amidst the power of death, to the glory of God.