

Grieving with Hope

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be back together with you this morning. We missed you all last Sunday.

Today, we're marking Eternity Sunday. This is the last day of the year on the Christian Calendar, as next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, which marks the start of a new Christian year.

Eternity Sunday is sometimes called Memorial Sunday or Christ the King Sunday. My own faith tradition growing up never celebrated this day. Discussions of death within the walls of our church were devoted to what would happen if you died without accepting Jesus, Good Friday, and then Funerals. I first heard of this Sunday when we started attending the Warman Mennonite Church. And I remember finding that first Eternity Sunday service at Warman so lovely- a chance to say the names of those we missed, a chance to be reminded that our sisters and brothers around us were grieving, even though the funerals were long over. It was a chance to normalize both the grief and the hope that surrounds death on a Sunday morning.

As I began preparing this sermon, I began to wonder: where did this Sunday come from? Do other traditions mark this day? Thank goodness for the ministry of Wikipedia. "**Totensonntag** (German: *Sunday of the Dead*), also called **Ewigkeitssonntag** (*Eternity Sunday*) or **Totenfest**, is a Protestant religious holiday in Germany and Switzerland, commemorating the faithfully departed. It falls on the last Sunday of the liturgical year in the Protestant Church in Germany and the Protestantse Kerk in The Netherlands. When the liturgical year, the Christian Calendar, was in development, readings on the last things (like death, judgment, eternal life) were

supposed to occur on the last Sunday of the year. Because next Sunday we begin anticipating the birth of Christ at Advent, it made sense to the Early Church Fathers, to talk about final things on the final Sunday of the year.

And protestant churches in Germany and Switzerland are not the only ones who commemorate this day. In the Roman Catholic Church, the last Sunday of the liturgical year is celebrated as Solemnity of Christ the King. The feast emphasizes the rule of Christ in eternity and shows parallels to *Eternity Sunday*. English Lutheran churches that follow the Revised Common Lectionary also celebrate Christ the King Sunday. In the Catholic tradition, the faithful departed are remembered on All Souls' Day.

In a very real sense, throughout church history, there is a strong sense that death is a part of life. As my father often opines, "Nobody lasts forever, Emily". Because death is a part of the human story, the church has tried to make sense of it. I had a pastor back in Manitoba who often reminded us in his sermons that in the first century, the time that Jesus was on the earth and the books of the New Testament were being written, death and what happened when someone died was a very present concern. Life expectancies were short, child mortality was high, and so the reality of a death and dying was really felt. Further still, the early church expected that Christ would return at any time, and they envision this being a very short period of time, a matter of days or weeks. So, when believers began to pass away, and Jesus still had not returned, they wondered...what would happen to these people? What happens to those who have departed and those who were still alive when Christ returned? These were very real questions that the church was wrestling with and that early church fathers and mothers were trying to speak to when they set up the church calendar, and included Eternity Sunday.

Obviously, with time, changes in culture, standards of living, and modern medicine, we've

become more insulated from the reality of death. Now, I'm very grateful to live in the time and places we do; I was a sickly kid, and I'm not sure what my life would have been like if I had lived before the invention of Penicillin. But as the reality of death faded from our day to day lives, it also faded from life in the church. Which I think is detrimental to both our communal and our spiritual health. Because the further we as the Church, the broader church, have moved away from the reality of death, the more we have lost the ability to speak meaningfully about death both to one another and to the hurting world. Our scriptures, which speak so poignantly and beautifully about death, are a way, I think, for us to find our way back to a Sacred Grief, that is a grief that is rooted in hope, even as waves of sorrow and loss wash over us. For the rest of my sermon this morning, we're going to contrast the cultural view of death and loss with the view that is given to us in scripture. Because these views have been and should be different.

We can hear this calling to a different understanding of death in our scripture for this morning. Let's listen again to those verses, this time, from The Message paraphrase, "And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don't want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus. And then this: We can tell you with complete confidence—we have the Master's word on it—that when the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still alive will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they'll be ahead of us. The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God's trumpet blast! He'll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise—they'll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the clouds to meet the Master. Oh, we'll be walking on air! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master. So reassure one another with these words."

So, let's talk about some of the ways that our faith reminds us that "the grave does not have the last word".

First, over the last 100 years, our culture has become one where death is hidden away. When someone dies, they are taken to a funeral home. There the body is made to look as life-like as possible, and we give one, maybe two days of services where we say goodbye to that person. We receive sympathy cards, with lines written by a greeting card poet in some office somewhere. It's all very...private, I suppose you could say. Grief, in our culture, is meant to be private, controlled, and measured. How quickly we bounce back after a loss is seen to matter. Think of how few days most employers give to people who have lost a loved one. Compartmentalize that grief, and go about daily life for the comfort of those around you. And yet, in scripture, we see that death is not a place of shame. Grief and the strong emotions that come with it are not private affairs, but public declarations. We need only to look to the Psalms, the depth of the capacity for public grief, for honest lament. It is okay to grieve, even in a culture that expects a tidy, private mourning.

The second way that Christians understand faith differently is that death is a losing. Life is about winning and when someone dies, they have lost. All that is good and victorious is on this side of the grave, we're told.

I read an interview recently with a woman who is a hospice nurse in the United States. She's gathered quite a following on social media for her honest, beautiful discussions about death in a culture that doesn't really talk about death. And in that interview she said this, "I think they should know what they want. I've been in more situations than you could imagine where people just don't know. Do they want to be in a nursing home at the end or at home? Organ donation?"

Do you want to be buried or cremated? The issue is a little deeper here: Someone gets diagnosed with a terminal illness, and we have a culture where you have to “fight.” That’s the terminology we use: “Fight against it.” So the family won’t say, “Do you want to be buried or cremated?” because those are not fighting words. I have had situations where someone has had terminal cancer for three years, and they die, and I say: “Do they want to be buried or cremated? Because I’ve told the funeral home I’d call.” And the family goes, “I don’t know what they wanted.” I’m like, We’ve known about this for three years! But no one wants to say: “You are going to die. What do you want us to do?” It’s against that culture of “You’re going to beat this.” Death, in our culture, is something to fight, dying is for losers.

Yet, the Bible, and specifically the Story of Jesus tells us that because of Jesus, his death and resurrection, there is no power left in the grave. The enemy is not there anymore, it is only Jesus, and his unending love. 1 Corinthians 15:55-58, ““Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” We do not need to fear death itself, because it is a part of life with Jesus, the one who stripped the grave of its fear and its power.

Further still, death is seen as a dangerous unknown, but scripture speaks of life after death with comforting assurance. We can trust this “unknown future” to our known God. Bishop NT Wright is a person who receives a lot of questions from people about heaven, and the specifics of what heaven will be like. Wright suggests that the most important information that we receive from the scriptures about Heaven is not about its appearance or “what we’ll do up there all day,” rather, the most important piece is that we’re “safe with Jesus”. “Safe with Jesus” and that offers us

hope, this Jesus who showed us over and over again the depth of God's love and care for humanity is keeping us safe, with him, is an antidote to the fear and danger that our culture has come to associate with death and dying.

Lastly, and this difference is a very practical one, is that death in our culture has become professionalized, and I think the church has a call to make death and grief a space that is rooted in community. Death, the task of preparing a body, the task of burying a body has all been passed along to "professional funeral workers" Thomas Lynch, who has run a funeral home in the Michigan since 1973 says, "Our culture has become so afraid of death and grief that we've changed how funerals are done. When I say we, I mean the last 50, 75, maybe 100 years is the first time in human history where a generation has steadfastly tried to do funerals without the dead guy there. Have you noticed this? We go to these ubiquitous celebrations of life. The celebration where everybody is welcome but the one who has died. They've been disappeared by someone like me who has your credit card numbers and your expiration date. You. Yeah, no pun intended. And, and I can, you know, I can disappear a body pretty quickly and have done and I regret because I think the real essential element of a funeral is getting the dead where they need to go. A celebration of life is a marketing tool. It's much easier to celebrate a life than a funeral. I mean, because everybody would rather celebrate. Usually there's drink involved and you get to smile more and tell jokey little anecdotes instead of remarking on how broken your heart feels lately. And but it does say, come with your best smiles. Leave your acute grief at the door. And what I find is, having done this for 50 years, that people don't need a good laugh when someone dies as much as they need a venue in which they can have a good cry. A good laugh feels good. A good cry, we don't trust as much. It is just as good, but we're not as willing to let ourselves go with it."

I think the church bears a special responsibility to offer the kind of care, rituals and service that allow space for grief. To stay with the one who has died, and to stay with those who are still here. Pastors often refer to this as the ministry of presence. To welcome the waves of grief as they come, to say, cry as long as you need, Jesus understands. To show up with baked goods and cold cuts because we know the last thing a grieving family is thinking about is feeding themselves.

When Taylor's uncle passed away this summer, the service was held at a funeral home in Saskatoon along with the "reception time" afterward. It was the first funeral I've ever been to where the meal, the coffee, the dainties, was served by employees, rather than members of a community. And I remember thinking how much I wanted that. I wanted a church lady to pile extra dainties on our plates, because "it had been such a hard day". I wanted to eat food from church plates that hundreds of grieving people had eaten off of in the past. I wanted all the things about this day to be held in community. The weight of death, of loss, is best held up, by community and by a faith whose saviour has known the grave himself.

Pastor Tom Long said, Well, and this truth telling that we should be doing at funerals is especially important because there are two preachers at every funeral. Capital "D" Death comes to every funeral and loves to preach. And Death's sermon is the same every time. It's, "Damn every one of you. I win every time. You want the evidence, it's right there. I break all loving relationships. I destroy all community. You belong to me." And we have the duty and delight of standing there and saying, "Oh, death, where's your victory? Where's your sting? I tell you a mystery." We got to say that."

That I think is the reason days like this one are so important in our church. Because we're telling each other a mystery, we are encouraging one another that our grief is not without hope, it's a

chance to be honest with God and with one another, to say that Death does not win. It did not have the last word for any of the people we named here this morning. It will not have the last word with us. This word of truth, this person of life-Jesus-has defeated death and we get to proclaim to another and, perhaps most importantly in this time and place, to this world. Amen.