

The Celebration of Life and Death

From the series: The Church: Human Community

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:2, 22; Romans 14:8

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
All Saints' Day, November 1, 1998

Transcription of the spoken sermon

The writer of the Ecclesiastes finds God inscrutable. He does not doubt God's existence; in fact, he seems to believe God has pre-ordained everything that happens. In one sense, that is positive; there is for everything a season and life is lived with a structure and order that encompasses the wide diversity of human experience - a time to be born, and a time to die ...

God has made everything suitable for its time, and God has put into the human mind a sense of past and future, but we cannot determine what God is up to. I like the translation "God has set eternity in the human heart," meaning, I suppose, that within our brief moment we sense we are part of something much grander, but again, what God is about, we cannot fathom. God is inscrutable; we simply have no clue as to what the future holds.

This does not lead to the paralysis of despair. Rather, be happy, enjoy life - work, eat, drink and take pleasure - a wholesome outlook.

But, when it comes to questions of the end, the writer remains agnostic because he finds God inscrutable. What is our fate? He answers, "Who knows?"

Life has structure; for everything there is a season, and life should be bold - eat, drink, and seek pleasure in your labor. But this biblical writer has nothing more to say, and I think it is because he finds God totally inscrutable.

I find this a fascinating contrast to the affirmation of another biblical writer, St. Paul. Paul was as Jewish as the writer of Ecclesiastes, but he was separated in time by at least three centuries and in experience by a great gulf. Between the times of these two, something had happened - the Word became flesh - God's self-expression in the humanity of Jesus.

Paul had an epiphany experience of Jesus, being overwhelmed with the truth that Jesus was God's Word, God's anointed - the revelation of the heart and purpose of God.

After setting forth his understanding of what God had done in Jesus in his letter to the Romans, he asks, "What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Subsequently in his letter to the Romans he deals with a very practical issue about how Christians should act with each other and in the course of that discussion in the 14th chapter, he declares,

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

It is this claim by Paul that I believe we verify in our concrete human experience in community. Life's limit situations, birth and death, and those significant passages in the meantime are marked in the community before the face of the Ultimate - the Source, creative ground, and final rest of our existence.

This is *All Saints Day*, a day of remembering those from the community whom we've loved and lost awhile. It is thus an appropriate time to reflect on community, on the communion of the saints, the community of God's people gathered in human community.

I chose the hymn, "I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry" intentionally for the theme of the day. Many have said that they cannot get through the hymn without moist eyes and a lump in the throat. Beginning at our borning cry and moving through the passages of our lives until we shut our weary eyes, the hymn is a celebration of the whole of life - and then some, for it ends with the promise of just one more surprise.

The passages pointed to in the hymn are passages marked in the church - baptism, childhood and nurture, adolescence and the perils of individuation into the emergence of faith and personal affirmation, finding a soul mate and the joy of human union, years of maturity moving toward old age and finally death. It is in community that we mark the passages of our lives. It is particularly then that we sense the need to belong to a faith family whose center is that Mystery that is the source of life and the gracious goal toward which our lives move.

It is the witness of so many who come into this community that the birth of a child triggers the spiritual awakening and over and over again I hear comments about the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism that it brings tears to eyes. It is a beautiful moment, a moment of pure grace when we recognize the child as gift and claim the promise, "I will be a God to your children."

I must skip over the intervening years of life to come to its close and there again something in us instinctively reaches out for the church, for its ministry. It is one of the high privileges of pastoral ministry to be present with the dying. It was my privilege this past week to witness the tenderness of family at the death vigil with

reassuring words, holding the hand, stroking the cheek, being present to and with the one slipping beyond the pale.

But when the final breath is taken and the loved one expires, it is not over. Again, I think instinctively we need something more - a gathering and not just a gathering, but a gathering in the context of worship, a remembering, a thanksgiving, a celebration of the life and a final commendation to the gracious embrace of the Eternal God. Over and over again I am struck by how natural it is to worship, to be lifted out of ourselves and come consciously into the Presence of the Transcendent One. The Mystery we call God in the presence of death.

Sometimes one hears of a gathering of friends of one deceased where their life is remembered and spoken of and it always seems to me so lacking in ultimate meaning. That, of course, is my bias, my conditioning. Yet, I think it is deeper than that. Does not the human heart and mind with its natural limitation yearn to break out of those limits and reach for some touch of the Eternal?

Here we rejoice at the wonder of a child. Our hearts meet at their wide-eyed wonder, their innocence, their total dependence, and their great potential. Here we grieve the loss of those we've dearly loved. Here we acknowledge honestly our pain, our loss, our guilt for words spoken or words not spoken, our sense of loss, maybe even anger, our failure to heal old wounds before it was too late. But, here, too, we await a word of grace, of forgiveness, of peace and surely of hope, believing finally all will be well. There is that within us that cries out for the sense of God's presence, God's grace, and God's peace.

And when we rejoice in a child or grieve a loved one lost, we do not want to be alone. Certainly we need such moments, too, but finally we need the community, family and extended faith family - the outpouring of love, care, and concern, the hug, the strong embrace, the presence of familiar faces, the sound of familiar voices and the ritual whose words and phrases leap to life, their familiarity a comfort and means of assurance. We need a place and a people with whom we can laugh and cry with no need to posture or put on false face. We need people who are the embodiment of God's love and God's grace.

The celebration of life and death - that is at the heart of the human community that is the church. Religion arises from that deep sense of mystery that pervades our human existence, our self-conscious awareness of an ultimate source and ground of our life, and sense of a Presence toward which we instinctively reach. From some founding experience there grows a story, a tradition, a ritual that enables us to orient our lives, to find meaning and peace. It is in the religious community that we are provided the environment and the means to negotiate the most significant passages of the human experience in laughter and in tears; in compassionate and loving embrace that is the sign of the God whose we are in life and in death, Who is experienced most deeply with a lump in the throat, a tear on the cheek, and a heart tender, open and soft.