

WGUMC November 1, 2015
Revelation 21:1-6

Beethoven died and was buried in the churchyard. A few days later, the town drunk was tripping through the cemetery and heard strange music coming from Beethoven's grave. He got spooked and called a Roman Catholic priest and a Protestant pastor. The pastor listened to the music and said, "I think that's the Ninth Symphony playing backward." And sure enough, along came the 7th, the 6th and the 5th symphonies, all playing in reverse. The priest figured it had to be some kind of evil spirit. But the pastor said, "No, that's just Beethoven decomposing."

I bet you are wishing you hadn't remembered to turn your clocks back last night, aren't you? I apologize for that. After all, I should be the first to say that death is no joking matter. If it were, we would die laughing because we have done a lot of death around here. Look at all these saints who died just in the last five years. We are still grieving them and, as anyone who

has lost a loved one knows, that's a lot of work. That's why we call it "grief work." Now I know that you have heard a lot about the stages of grief, but the fact is that we don't progress neatly from one stage to another.

Grief work is more like a task list. William Worden, a professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School, described grief in terms of four tasks. One task for those of us who are grieving is to accept the reality of our loss. Another task is to experience the pain of grief. The third task is to adjust to the world without the person we have loved. And the fourth task for us is to withdraw some of the emotional energy we have been using to grieve so that we can begin to build a new life.

The problem with grief work is not only that these tasks are hard, but we are likely to find ourselves having to do more than one of them at the same time and some of them many times. We have to go back and redo them because our feelings

and perceptions keep changing. And when it comes to grief, multitasking is very taxing. Grief is exhausting!

Naturally, some of us struggle with these tasks more than others, while some of us avoid them altogether. One of the sacred privileges of being a pastor is getting close enough to grief to watch how some do it better.

In my experience, the people who accept death most gracefully are the ones who are dying. "Ruby, how do you feel today?" we would ask her. "Thankful," she would reply. But now she is gone and the rest of us are here. I guess that means that we still have a lot to learn about living before we are ready to die.

The saints we celebrate today were able to live better because somehow they could see farther. Somehow they could share the vision that John saw of the new earth and the new heaven, and in some very real sense, they already lived there. For them, God was not far off, in some distant galaxy. They

knew that God chooses to be right here, right now, with us messed up mortals.

John says that in the new earth, God will make a home and dwell with us. In fact, the Greek says that God will pitch a tent with us. So here we are in the old earth. It's as if we were living in the Jungle, right along the creek. It's raining hard, the camp is flooding, the police are coming, but will God get there first and set up a big tent to keep us all together, safe, warm and dry. Not a one will be lost, because what God made, God will save. God doesn't lose things as we do. And so we will end up right where we began. Our ending is our beginning, and it's all in God.

If that's too mystical for you, try this. Science teaches us about the laws of conservation of matter and energy. Faith teaches us that there is a spiritual corollary. There is a conservation of matter. My material body doesn't disappear when I die; it just gets recycled. The minerals in my body get

incorporated into the bodies of other living things. Likewise, there is a conservation of spirit. My spirit does not die; but it does get transformed. In the new earth, my spirit will take on a new and inconceivable life. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Now when you get as old as a Ruby Good night or a Walt Mounts or a Grace Praisewater, a lot of things will have already passed away. And I'm not just talking about spouses or friends. I'm talking about the things we invest too much energy in: the mistakes we can't forget, the hurts we can't forgive, the disappointments that we can't live down, the worries we won't let go. Considering that this old earth is full of these things, what a feeling of relief when it passes away! What a joy, what a blessing, when the new earth comes!

I was thinking the other day that, short of dying, there is nothing like a cancer diagnosis to get you ready for the new

earth. Cancer is a wake-up call that says: you don't have to be dying in order to learn how to live. Use your troubles as your teacher. Use your pain as your professor. Use your diagnosis to chart a new direction. Welcome all the challenges in your life as change agents. You need them, because only when you have been challenged long enough and lived through enough, will you learn as these saints learned how to live in the new earth even while you are still stuck in the old one.

How many times have I heard people tell me after I delivered a eulogy: "I wish I had known all those things about her when she was alive. It's a shame that we don't ever hear peoples' stories until after they are dead." And then we go away from the funeral with a little bit of regret that we didn't take the opportunity to learn all that we could have learned from the person we just lost.

Except that the members of the communion of saints are not lost to us. Their love is still pouring into our hearts. Their

words are still ringing in our ears. Their ways are still giving us wisdom for our lives. Their service is still inspiring us to serve. Whether we know it or not, their stories have become intertwined with our stories. And their prayers for us are even now ushering us into the presence of God. This is what we mean when we talk about the communion of saints.

Sometimes a picture can explain it better. Did you ever see the movie, *Places in the Heart*, with Sally Field and Danny Glover? The story begins in death. A sheriff in a small southern town is accidentally shot and killed by a young black boy. The boy is subsequently lynched by a mob.

It's in the middle of the Great Depression, but the sheriff's widow is determined to keep the family farm going. She needs help, both money and muscle, so she takes in the blind brother-in-law of the banker in order to get a loan. And she hires a black man named Moses to get the crops in. She aims to be the first one in the county to sell a bale of cotton and win \$100

cash prize. That way she can pay the mortgage and keep the farm.

On account of Moses, the miracle worker, she wins the contest. Then the Ku Klux Klan gets wind of the story. They drag Moses off, beat him and are about to kill him, when the blind man steps in. He recognizes every one of the hooded men by their voice and calls them out one by one. One by one, they all leave and go home. But Moses knows that he has to leave, too.

That little town has a lot of healing to do, and the last scene in the movie gives us hope that someday it might get done. The townsfolk are all in the church. They are taking communion. The plate of bread and the tray of cups pass slowly from person to person, from pew to pew. And sitting in those pews with all the cowardly men of the KKK are the blind man, the black man, the dead sheriff and the black boy. You see there are places in the heart for both the living and the

dead. Together, they are receiving and being received into the Body of Christ, the new earth, the new heaven. In the amazing grace of God, the end comes right back to the beginning. So you can come to the table, for God has saved you a seat in the communion of saints.