

Acts 2:22-33

‘You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,

“I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

‘Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, “He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.” This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.

Psalm 8

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

“Call From the Columbarium”

“We Must Never Forget”

Rev. Charles Schuster

May 30, 2010

At the end of our service, the Boy Scouts will come in and take the flags out to the Columbarium area. We are invited to join them there for a brief service of dedication and celebration, and then we'll have an opportunity to eat a light lunch and to visit.

Sometimes the first idea you have isn't your best and you want to reject it. Sometimes the email that you write after your angry is not the email you ought to send. And sometimes the first thought that comes into your mind to say isn't so wise, and maybe shouldn't be said. Someone gave me a 5x7 card with a quotation on it, and I put it up in my office on the wall opposite from the window in the door. You could walk down the hall with the door closed and you could look through the glass window at my office, and you could see the saying that's on the card, that says, "I think, therefore I'm liberal." Now, my wife Kathy pointed a few things out to me, reflective of the fact that it was both inflammatory and hypocritical, and so I took it down.

I had a great title for the sermon today, and I could have used it. I mean, today, we're going to finish the morning in the garden with the ashes of some of our loved ones and members of our community interred. Today when we have flags in the sanctuary and we will do the flag ceremony with the Boy Scouts and the Columbarium, the title I could have used, "I Wouldn't Be Caught Dead in the Columbarium." Now, there are two major controversies that have been here at the church in the seven years that I've been here, and I've been in the middle of both of them, and one involved the flags in the sanctuary, and the other one involved the building of the Columbarium. So the title for the sermon, "I Wouldn't Be Caught Dead in the Columbarium" could be a problem. But let me tell you, if I had used that title, and if this sermon would have been guided by that title, it would have been fine. That Columbarium, it does have the remains of the deceased members of our congregation, but it does not focus us on death. In fact, it brings us up to life. We are not caught dead in the Columbarium, we are brought life in the Columbarium. It's because of the vision and the voices of the people who have gone before us... Let me show you what I mean.

Memorial Weekend, the visions, first of all. There is a vision today, something that we can see as we remember our friends and loved ones and members of our congregation, the Psalmist implies it. Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth, you whose glory is changed from above, from the heavens, by the mouths of babes and infants, what are we that you are mindful of us? What are we, when we are not mindful of God. What are we when we lack a vision of God? What are we when we have this vision of God? We're people of courage, is who we are. Like those who have gone before us. They were. Jesus had a vision of God. It gave him courage. You know there's very little that was new in what he said, or even what he did. There's very little that was new. Jesus spoke of the importance of love and how we are to love our enemies, but that wasn't original. He talked about the importance of caring for the neighbor, love your neighbor as yourself, and to have some high degree of respect for ourselves. But he copied that from his Bible, Hebrew scripture.

Adam Gopnik has written an excellent article in the New Yorker magazine entitled, "What Did Jesus Do?" It is a survey of the scholars' struggle to find out what is basic and unique about Jesus. I think the most unique word he spoke, and I really think he spoke it, because it's so unusual in this context, I think it's the word "Abba" that means Father, that really means Daddy. It's a very familiar sense. And, when you think about it, most likely Jesus didn't have a father all of his life. Scholars think that Joseph died rather early, and

for him to think of God as Abba, Father, reflects perhaps that Joseph was a wonderful daddy, as Mary was a wonderful mama. He called God "Abba." It's a vision, to see God as present and loving. It's the vision. It's what we can see. It's what our loved ones gone before us have found, and the courage that they were able to get because of that vision. When I remember the people whose names we read earlier in this service, I think of their vision of God and the courage they had. Some of them struggled with illness and pain, but they found courage in knowing that God was with them. There are people in the Columbarium area, in the cemetery area as well, in the town, in the areas around here, in the cemeteries, and in our Columbarium, there are people, I know, who came to see the place where they would be interred or buried, and they knew the end for them was near, but they were not afraid. And there are people in our congregation who suffered serious illness and who endured experimental techniques that they knew probably wouldn't help them, but might help somebody else who had the same medical complications. They were not afraid.

Because there's this vision. It's a way of looking at life. It says, "Tough times will come, but they won't last, and tough people take tough times and conquer them." It says to us, "Nothing happens without meaning in life, and life is full of coincidence, and coincidence is, what Einstein said, coincidence is God's way of being anonymous." God is present. It says to us, "Obstacles are not put there to block our path, but they can be, if we use them right, stepping stones used to build our character." It's a vision, and we're mindful. It's a vision of God. A vision that says "There will be tomorrow, and God will be with us, whatever tomorrow brings." There was a weather forecast column in a local paper in Iowa, several years ago, in an Iowa newspaper. It said, I think I know what they meant to say, but this is what it said: "There is a 90 % chance of tomorrow." Well, there is a vision that says "There's a 100% chance of tomorrow, and we can live it, and if we become ill we can face it, and if we die, God is mindful of us."

Ben Stein is the owner of Morton's Steak House. He knows celebrities and movie stars and famous people. He recently had the following observation: "I no longer think Hollywood stars are terribly important. The real star, the kind who haunts me day and night, is the American soldier in Baghdad who saw the little girl playing with a piece of unexploded ordnance near a street where he was guarding, and he pushed her aside and threw himself on it just as it exploded. He left a family desolate in California, and a little girl alive in Baghdad." Visions of freedom. Reason to sacrifice. Giving your life. Living your life for something beyond yourself, for values beyond self-interest. Giving your life for something. Living your life, it's the reason to remember. It's why we put flags in the sanctuary this day, so we can see them, something we can see, a vision we can celebrate of those who gave their lives for that flag. The vision of God present reminds us that our God is a God of life, not death, and our biggest problem in life is not how we die, at the end of our days, but how we live until we do, because death is just another step and life is an adventure. We are put here to enjoy it from birth to death and from death to beyond. The vision of how we live a worthwhile life. Those who have gone before us, they have shown us. They have shown us.

This week Gary Coleman, Art Linkletter, and Dennis Hopper, all three of them died. When I think of Dennis Hopper, I think of a person who, in the movies that he made, always kind of represented just somebody ordinary, and when you looked at his movies, you had the idea you could have played that part. Gary Coleman, when I think of him, I think of a boy who never grew up, and he lived a sad life, a tragic, sad life. And when I think of Art Linkletter, a 95-year-old man who never grew old, who had a daughter who committed suicide, who had a son who was killed in an awful automobile accident and another son who died of cancer. But Art Linkletter had a vision that was for him a working faith. He said once, "Everybody has tragedy in their lives, and how we come out the other side of it kind of depends on a number of things. We can either find ourselves diminished by it, or strengthened because of it." He said, "I don't know why it is, but it just has seemed to me that the tragedies that I've experienced somehow, deep within me, I have been able by the grace of God to find strength." We remember his way with children and how he could be on their level, but we also remember he said a lot about aging. In fact he wrote a book, *Growing Old Isn't for Sissies*. And he had a faith in God. The vision that gave him courage we remember today. The courage of those friends and loved ones who have given us an example of how to live until we die. And Jesus said of them, "If you have eyes to see, then let them see." The courage.

Secondly, if you have ears to hear, then let your ears hear the voices. Not just the visions, but the voices, because those voices continue to speak, and what they speak is wisdom from those who have gone before us. It is possible to learn, it is possible to hear the voices. We may not hear all of it, but we'll hear some of it. I love the Gary Larson cartoon, two people coming out of church. The message on the church bulletin board says, "Sermon today: the Ten Commandments." One of them turned to the other one and said, "Well, at least I haven't made any graven images."

Leo Buscaglia was a professor and a writer, I loved his books. Any time he did a class on one of the Leo Buscaglia books, the class would take on his personality, which was bizarre. One time he had his class, fall had come, he had his class go out into the yard and rake up the leaves and put them in bags and bring all the bags full of leaves into his house and just pour all the leaves all over his house. That's just the kind of person he was. He was on an airplane, the flight was from California to New Jersey, it was a five-hour flight, and as he came to take his seat he had the aisle seat, and the person sitting beside him who was already there, you could tell was annoyed that he was sitting there, and in fact he even said, "I had hoped to be able to spread out a little bit." And then a baby cried and the guy sitting beside Leo said, "Great. I hate babies. We're going to hear that baby scream for five hours." And then the flight attendant was giving instructions about seat belts and exit rows and the guy beside Leo said, "I hate flight attendants. I mean, they're nothing but glorified waitresses. Just awful." They announced that there would be sandwiches and light snacks, but you could purchase them, he said, "Why would anybody want to purchase that stuff. I kind of resent that you have to buy it. By the way, it's just terrible anyway, it's just plastic." And then they made the announcement that said all the flights were smoke-free, and whatever you do, don't even think about disabling the smoke detector in the rest room, and he said, "I hate smokers, they ought to just take them all out and shoot them." The plane was off the ground. The guy said to Buscaglia, "By the way,

what do you do?" "I'm a professor." "What do you teach?" "Educational psychology." "What's that?" "Well, mostly I teach courses on relationships, on how to treat one another well, and how to get along, and basically I teach about love." And this seatmate looked at him in complete sincerity and said, "I'm glad to be sitting beside someone who shares my values." Shared values. We hear voices. We listen to their wisdom, and we learn from them, if we allow it.

We can say we have shared values, but it's just a memorized mantra unless we really hear it. The saints have tried to speak to us their wisdom. They have lived well, but they could have lived better, and they want us to know that. They have experienced joy in their lives, and they have found a richness that was extremely valuable, and have invited us to their party, and we have heard their voices. And now we have come to see that our problems are not unique to us, but have been faced by others, and we can learn from that. Our strangeness is not so weird, because we are all more alike than we ever could recognize. If a liberal thinks he's the only one who thinks, he'd better think again. And if a conservative believes she is the only one holding onto the highest values, she has substituted her right-thinking orthodoxy for self-centered arrogance, and if a young person looks down at an old person, and thinks that age is obsolete, then the young person would soon learn that the latest idea is only a repeat of something that was thought two decades ago, because the pendulum swings. We are more alike than we know.

That reading from Acts, the Pentecost event, the birth of the church, the holy spirit, the first sermon after the church was born, Luke tells us, the sermon preached by Peter. "Remember Jesus of Nazareth as one attested to you by God by mighty works and wondrous signs, hear the voice of Jesus," Peter is saying. And then he said, "Remember David who died and was buried in his tomb is with us today, remember how he was a prophet. Hear the voice of David." Jesus heard the voices. He heard the voice of John the Baptist, who came out of the wilderness, calling for people to repent. He heard the voice of the prophet who said, "Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my family we will serve the Lord." We hear voices of the saints. We learn from their wisdom. We learn from their mistakes as well.

Robert Orbin said, "When I was in grade school, I was told, if I wanted to get a good job, I had to graduate from high school, so I went to high school. When I was in high school, I was told, to get a really good job, I had to go to college, so I went to college. When I was in college about to graduate, I was told by everybody that a bachelor's degree just couldn't get you a particularly good job, that you needed a master's degree, so I got a masters. And then I was told after I got into the masters program, that only takes you so far, I should get a doctorate, so I got a PhD. And then I went out to get a job, and they told me they were looking for somebody younger." Live and learn. Only if we hear the voices from the saints. The young are only as young as the dreams they hold onto, and the old are only wise if they are able to admit they don't know.

Several years ago, the dead literally spoke to the living in Denver, at the museum of Nature and Science. Bodyworks, it was called. There's a version of it now, it has to do with the human heart. This was several years ago. The exhibit was bodies of the dead

whose muscles and nerves and organs and bones were preserved in plastic, and arranged where they would have been. It was an eerie thing to see, and it was fascinating, and I remember walking through it, and there was a section where they had the human lung, and there was a set of human lungs that had been exposed to cigarette smoke, and I heard the person who went through ahead of us say to the woman he was with, "Yes, dear, I saw that." And on the table of that exhibit, there seemed to be trash accumulating. Such an odd thing, that staff at the museum couldn't figure this out. Why would somebody trash a museum piece. Then they took a look at what was there, and it wasn't really trash, exactly. It was crumpled-up paper from cigarette packaging. People heard the voice of the dead, they witnessed the effect of smoking and decided right then, and right there, they were going to quit, and they put their last pack of cigarettes on the table and walked away, I hope for good, not smoking again. The voice of the saints. The wisdom of the past. Oh, I hear them, I sit in my office, they're out there in the Columbarium. I hear those voices. All those people in the church who have gone before us. I hear them. There's one who keeps telling me how I ought to vote, and he goes on to tell me I ought to listen more to Wayne Dyer, who said feeling unworthy is like putting a huge obstacle in front of the God force. And I hear the voice of another person who said, "When you're brushing your teeth, turn off the water, it's a waste of water." And I hear the voice of another one who says that the journey begins at the end of our worldly existence that we know, and somewhere the trials of life are resolved into peace when the soul finds its way to the light. And I hear the voice of another person who says you can sing tenor in the choir even if you're a girl and you can be a clown to children even if you're a grown adult. And I hear the voice of another person, the one who told General Patton how to get food to the troops by putting explosives in the river in France, and everybody ate fish. And I hear the voice of another who said, "Why not, instead of sending our young people out to war, why not send them out to peace?" and the result was the Peace Corps. The wisdom in the words in the saints, we listen to their voices. Jesus said, "If you have ears, let them hear."

There is a debate going on about sin. Most people think sin is in the Adam and Eve story, where the man and woman tried to be something they weren't. They thought they were gods. That is sin, hubris, pride. Others, like Harold Kushner, believe that the Cain and Able story was sort of the original sin, when one brother killed another brother, saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Sin is thinking there's not enough love to go around. Truth is, the more love we give, the more love we have, for God is love, and God is abundant love, and God is unconditional love, and it's a sin not to believe that and live it, as if it were not true. Paul Tillich defined sin as missing the mark, or being separated from God. I think sin, or part of it, is when we live out our lives and fail to notice them. I think our sin is thinking we're it, that there's nothing before us, and there will be nothing beyond us. I think sin happens when we forget, when we cannot see the vision of God they had, the courage of their conviction, that inspires us to prevail, or when we cannot hear the wisdom of the dead, the learning that comes to us, what they learned in their lives, and to live until we die. Because we forget. That's why Jesus said, if you've got eyes to see, look. If you've got ears to hear, listen. And you won't be caught dead in the Columbarium, because the memories and memorials of those people there, as when they lived, now as they are dead, continue to give us life.