

MAKE LOVE STRONGER THAN DEATH

Texts on Sunday, November 3, 2013

Daniel 7:1-18; Luke 6: 17-31

As this November marches on, the news will be noting well the ways by which we have come. On the 22nd of the month come 'round fifty years since that day in Dallas when Pres. Kennedy lay dead from a bullet. On Nov. 19th, we mark 150 years since Pres. Lincoln traveled to Gettysburg, Penna. for the dedication of this country's first national cemetery. The 278 words of his speech, which Lincoln supposed the world would "little note nor long remember," cut a new channel for the constitution of the young nation. His theme was the meaning of "these honored dead." Late this month, we will celebrate Thanksgiving. Perhaps we will be reminded of the holiday's origin, not with Pilgrims but with Pres. Lincoln, for it was just one week after his speech at Gettysburg that Americans first celebrated the national Thanksgiving holiday. Lincoln's proclamation read, in part:

"It has seemed to me fit and proper that . . . the gracious gifts of the Most High God . . . should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens . . . to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father . . . And I recommend to them that . . . they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged . . ."

In a word, Thanksgiving was established for a country dealing with death. Now here we are at All Saints, having remembered our beloved dead, with all the saints who from their labors rest. In a moment, we will share in the Lord's Supper, and once more "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again." From every angle, the mask of death regards us. Usually we turn from it. Yet surely it is a gift of faith in God to face what is real. Death is real. Indeed, every piston in the engines of culture and personal aspiration is driven by our relationship with death. Death is real. Let us turn and look.



The dreams of Daniel, like those of the Revelation to John, are seldom read in middle-class churches. So many seem to spend all their Bible energies here, spying out likenesses between Democratic presidents and these fantastic beasts, that the whole project of study may seem exhausting. But it is not so hard. The dreams are not predictions. The beasts are symbols for the empires of the ancient world—Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The dreamer was looking back over centuries of death and annihilation brought by and then upon three of those empires. Now, facing the newest destroyer, Rome, in the middle of the 2nd century B.C., the dreamer dreamed of a pow-

er from heaven able to anoint a man with blessing and honor and glory and power sufficient to put an end forever! to the evil engines of death by design and domination visited upon the Jews in violence, torture, and abominations. *O God, may someone stop all this for good!* Have you never prayed a prayer like that? Had these dreams of destroyers-destroyed been any less vivid, or any more practical, they would never have been stored in jars for the generations. As it is, they give voice to urgent, fervent prayers forever for holy help against massacre and mayhem. They are dreams that deal with death.

Yet from dreams we must at length awake. And to what? For the mass of humanity, they wake from dreams to despair. This morning, we will not count the ways, but say this: Despair is at the root of every kind of neurosis and addiction and self-destructive behavior. And more: Despair is a way of dealing with life caught in the wheels of empire, of greed heedless of human need, of droning on and on, racist, stopping, frisking, stealing food stamps from the poorest. That soul death in uncountable millions is linked directly to the destructions wrought by the corporate-state in pursuit of domination, for despair is just a way of dealing with the dealers of death. How does anyone stay awake through the nightmare, and not smoke it with dreams? Most don't. And if our religion seems to many but dreams; seems but feeble prayer that all be healed; seems but hopes heaved heavenward that someday, baby, ain't gonna worry my life anymore; what wonder is it that so many drop religion like a bad drug. Can we deal with death, real deaths?

In the little book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman carefully considers Jesus' teaching, whom he taught, and to what end. He writes, "No Jewish person could deal with the question of his practical life until first he had settled within himself this critical issue . . . what must be the attitude toward Rome . . . This is the position of the disinherited in every age." (p. 22) To this I would add only that in every age, this is the position of all who are in despair: What must be the attitude toward the dominators? Of Jesus' aims in teaching, Thurman says, "The basic principles of his way of life cut straight through to the despair of his fellows, and [find] it groundless." (p. 35) In other words, Jesus deals with death directly, to reveal that despair in the face of the dominator is not your destiny, and must not be your death.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are you poor, for to you is the kingdom of God," he is dealing with death the way we really face it, in our terror of having no means to meet life's demand. When Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh," he speaks not of an impossibly heavenly felicity, but of a transformation now that can take place within you now, if you will deal with death now. When Jesus says you are blessed when people revile you for living your life in God, and says that your reward is great in

heaven, this is no promise of treats at heaven's gate dropped into you like Halloween chocolates. No! Jesus says, The kingdom of God is within. The kingdom of God is within.

Even if you have no feeling for a meaning in this word, do this with this affirmation, this promise: When you encounter those who are living in it and who are dying in it, and you hear them voice their confidence that neither death nor life nor anything else in all creation will separate them from the love of God, take them as your guides and teachers. Join in imitating them. The reality of their hope will change you, if you do not drown in it cynicism.

See yourself as God made you. Like all humans, you are built to channel powers from heaven to earth. Christ came for this, to proclaim the kingdom of God within. There, within, powers await so great that their appearing in by grace in your heart and hands and mind must astonish and humble you. These are powers to love your enemy. To do good to those who hate you. To give to everyone who begs from you expecting nothing in return. To do nothing to anyone which you would hate having had done to you.

There is one reason only that these powers do not flow through us like liquid will of God. It is our fear of deaths. It is our resistance to dealing with our deaths. We stop the flow of God within, and little know of God's blessing, and bless others but little, when there is no moment between our feeling threatened and our reactive self-defense; no space for grace; but just our small self twisting like a worm on a hook to save itself, unbelieving that the kingdom of God is within, and we are alive, eternal. This is no dream. This is waking. This is Jesus waking us up to deal with death and with life, after we have died that death from which God gives us second birth.

Now, this matters for you, O Riverside, for you are people of many passions for God and for justice. Yet many of you judge others' passions as unimportant compared with your own. So quickly judging, you learn nothing of or from one another, and you lose the chance to learn how to deal with death; how to die to yourself; how to give up for God, for good. And it is a spiritual law that those who quickly judge and quickly defend are ever obsessed with anxieties over that earthly death through which all must pass. But learning death well was the whole game of life, Jesus says. To learn to love and let go of fears and defenses and live into God.

Look, the powers that crush lives are legion. Moreover, if we are in the least comfortable in this society, we ourselves are bound up with the powers that crush lives, and we cannot wash ourselves clean. We need God's help. We still need one like a human with power and glory to show us the life we are given, and stir us to the courage we are given to deal with death as it

appears under any of its masks. In the church, whoever prays for the unloved and the unloving is dealing with death. Whoever faces Stop & Frisk not hating the enemy is dealing with death. Whoever demands that legislators restore to the poor what they've taken is dealing with death. Whoever challenges Israel to live with their Palestinian neighbors according to their ancient laws of love is dealing with death. Whoever holds America's dominators accountable for our wars and our warming the earth to death is dealing with death. Whoever holds those grieving and in despair is dealing with death according to the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Only your disregard and disdain for others' ways of dealing with death in this hard life is unjust and dangerous to your eternal life.

Be at peace with one another. When you come to the table, remember: Jesus gave his life to wake you from despair to the power God gives you and the courage to use it to make love stronger than death.

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