

Sermon by Ashley Hall
Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church
Manhattan, New York
9 March 2008

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8: 6-11
John 11: 1-45

In the name of the Father + and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was always very close to my grandfather, Marcus Bennett. Even though as a man I grew to be quite a bit taller than he was, to my mind he was always a giant. He was a sixth-generation Texan, and fit the part: always in cowboy boots, a short-brim cowboy hat, and a cheek full of a generous pinch of tobacco. It seemed that he could do anything and would live forever. But at 87, the day we all knew would come had arrived. He was buried in a small central Texas Baptist church. The congregation's new preacher, an eager man about my age, began his funeral sermon by telling us: don't be sad! Don't grieve! Marcus wouldn't want you to be sad, he's in heaven now! Anytime you feel like crying, think of the joy Marcus must be experiencing with the Lord! When you cry and grieve, you are telling God that you do not have a strong and deep faith.

I can testify to you all that as a result of that sermon, my grief did give way. But my grief was not replaced with joy or peace, but with rage! I was angry because we were not in a situation in which someone needed to be encouraged to move on; he was not dealing with a person trapped in a cycle of regret, despair, and hopelessness many years after the death of a loved one. Instead, he was confronting grief in its most raw, immediate, and pressing form. I grieved

because I love my grandfather dearly. Our grief was a testimony to our love. This morning, I wonder what that young preacher would have said to Jesus in today's gospel. We read that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." When Jesus sees Mary's grief, we are told that "he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." Then, Jesus wept.

The psalmist today reminds us too that we grieve not only at the death of loved ones, but the small deaths that we endure almost daily: the failures, frustrations, and fears that so engulf us that we cry out to the Lord "from out of the depths." In biblical imagery, sin and death are often equated. Because of sin, we suffer through our own faults. Also, because of sin, we can suffer through no fault of our own. For whatever the reason, life can be painful and we are moved to grief.

I do not mean to dwell in a mean-spirited manner on that young preacher. I do, however, wish to counter a common misconception among all Christians about our faith. Too often, we Christians buy into a distortion of the Gospel, which tells us that God wants us to be wealthy, beautiful, successful, and subject to no pain or suffering. To admit or to complain of suffering is somehow cast as a lack of faith. We are often tempted to a false piety, which says that because we have been made holy, we

need to put on a stoic front; shedding tears of neither real sorrow or joy. My brothers and sisters: banish such ideas from your mind!

To be sure, God intends good things for all people. Likewise, we are not called to embrace suffering for its own sake. Rather, we are called to be in the midst of life, with all of its joy and suffering for the sake of Christ. If we are to be true followers of the Gospel, we are called to share the good news of salvation for all people in all places. We are called to love others with the unconditional love with which God has loved us. This understanding of God's unconditional love for each of us leads me to offer two points for your consideration: a definition of true Christian freedom and a definition of true Christian hope.

In Christ, God has not freed us *from* the world, but *for* the world. As Luther reminds us, Christian freedom means being subject to no one, yet servant of all. Ultimately, Christian freedom is the freedom to love unconditionally. Christian freedom is the permission to put aside our fears and doubts and the power to make ourselves truly available to others: to our partners, our families, and perfect strangers. Christian freedom is the permission to say "YES" to that terrifying risk that is life and love. Christian freedom, then, is the invitation to protect and comfort others in their vulnerability, to enter into their joys and sorrows. Christian freedom is the permission to be vulnerable to others, to allow others to speak words of comfort, correction, or consolation to us in our own joys and sorrows. Remember, that Christ's own path of love led a death on the Cross. But I do not make this observation to invoke a guilt-trip. Rather, because God has endured all of these things out of love for us, I mean to

invoke hope.

This leads me to the second and main point: a definition of Christian hope. Christianity tells us that because of what God in Christ *has done* for us, we have assurance of what God in Christ *will do* for us. God has taken up human flesh and dwelt among us. We see that in the experiences of Christ, there is nothing that separates us from God. God has drawn so near to us that the second person of the divine Trinity — Jesus, the incarnate Word — did not disdain to die. Rather, he embraced suffering, but not for the sake of suffering. He endured all things for us as an act of self-giving love. In rising again, Jesus revealed his power over sin and death; because of Christ, in the words of St. Paul, "death can no longer claim the victory over our lives." This is what we make special intention to remember in the season of Lent.

But we also need to remember that this was not just a past event. Again, because of what God *has done*, we have assurance — that is, hope — of what God *will do* for us. We are tempted to think of God's mighty deeds as dwelling in the distant past: the dry bones which came to life, the resurrection of Lazarus. But Christ's own death and resurrection prompts us to cast our eyes upon the future. By proceeding us in death, Christ has gone before us to prepare the way of resurrection. By conquering death, Christ's shares the victory with each of us. God dwells in the future; God awaits us there; God has prepared a place for us there. One of the prayers used in Lent reads "Lord, you call us to ventures in which we cannot see the end; give us the faith to know that it is your hand that guides us." In calling us into the future God is calling us to hope, to trust in his promise. God is calling us to trust in his restorative power: "Son of Man, can

these bones live? O Lord God, you know.” God is calling us to trust in his redemptive promise: I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in me shall never die. In God’s declaration of unconditional love for humanity in Christ, there is resurrection: not only of our daily lives but also of death itself.

Our future, just like our past, will be filled with moments of frustration and failure, and we will all surely die. But Christian hope tells us that these will not be the last word. God beckons us ever forward. In Christian hope, we know that in love there is redemption. When

we fail, there is also the power of reconciliation. When we die in Christ, there is the promise of resurrection. Therefore, in Christian freedom, love deeply knowing that God precedes you. Should love change or be lost, grieve. In your grief, cast your hope upon the Lord, as the Psalm reminds us today: “Out of the depths I call to you, O Lord. I wait for the Lord . . . in his word is my hope. With the Lord there is mercy, with him there is overabundant redemption.” Love deeply, for tomorrow awaits you.

Amen.