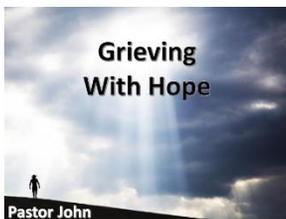


"Grieving with Hope"

November 12, 2017

1st Thessalonians 4: 13-18

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.



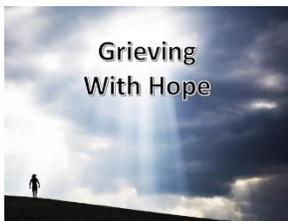
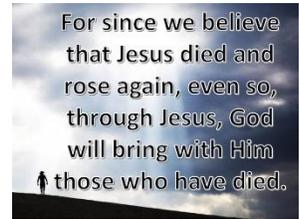
Last week I began the November series, "The Good News About Death". On November 5th, I spoke of what the other side of the curtain – life eternal – looks like according to

John's Revelation. It is a vision full of hope and joy. It is a promise that all who call on Christ as Lord and Savior live towards. That same promise and relationship with Christ offers all believers peace and contentment in this life as well. Yet at times it is hard to live with Christ's peace and contentment in this life because at times, we experience loss and we encounter grief. Today we look at how we grieve with hope. Let us pray.

In today's passage, Paul is writing to the Thessalonians to help them deal with their serious concerns about death. They are presently concerned about those who have died since Jesus was resurrected. Paul begins by addressing the views commonly held by the cultures that existed around the church and its beliefs. In the opening verse Paul writes, "*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope*". The Christian faith is one that professes hope for eternal life. While it is true that the Greeks and Egyptians believed that the soul went on to some type of afterlife and even some of the Jews believed in a resurrection of the soul, just what it was like was not defined. In the dominant culture of the day, the pagan world faced death with despair. For the majority of the people around the church in Thessalonica, death was simply the end. The pagan world met death with a grim resignation and a bleak hopelessness. It is much the same today for those who lose a loved one who did not profess faith in Christ. For those without faith, the "what now?" question continues to go unanswered. Paul was reminding the church then and us, the church now, that we do have the hope of eternal life through our faith in Christ. He was saying to the church in Thessalonica and to us today: hold fast to your faith, do not listen to the lies of the non-believing world. God is in control.

The early church believed that Jesus would return very soon after His death and resurrection. They fully expected themselves to be alive when Jesus returned. But as time passed, people died. Those yet alive became worried about what would happen to the "souls" of these recently departed Christians. The church in Thessalonica was worried that those who died would not share in the glory of

the day when Christ returned – again, a day they believed would be coming soon. Into this worry and fear, Paul speaks a word of hope. In verse fourteen Paul writes, *“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died”*. For Paul, there was no distinction between a believer’s relationship with Christ in life and their relationship with Christ in death. Paul believed that there was nothing that could separate one who loves Jesus from Jesus. In Romans, Paul wrote that nothing – not even life or death – can separate us from the love we find and have in Christ Jesus. For Paul, then, because Christ died and rose again, so too will the one who was and is with Christ also rise again. No believer will be left behind. All who are in a personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior will one day be with Him in eternal life – whether that time comes before, during, or after Christ’s return. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.



The Thessalonians were also wrestling with a second question concerning death. They wanted to know why death had such a sting if Christ had won the victory over death. It is a question we wrestle with today too, every time someone we love dies. At the core of our faith is a word about death, broken wide open on Easter Sunday. Christ, who died, is now resurrected and lives forever. Because Christ lives, we too will one day live. Because Christ claimed victory over the grave, we too will one day claim victory over death. Jesus himself spoke of this in John 14:19, saying, *“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live”*. Yet in the here and now in our present lives,

like the Thessalonians, we too struggle with grief and pain and hurt in the midst of our human losses. Death has a very real human sting to it.

As Christians, we must embrace the very real emotions and feelings that come with loss while also embracing the hope of eternal life. In the words that I say as I begin almost all funerals and memorial services that I officiate, I begin by recognizing that we have come together to both praise God and to acknowledge our human loss, to rejoice in the promises of eternal life and to comfort and love one another in our grief. It is what is meant by "grieving with hope". It is what allows us, as Christians, to walk through the valleys of the shadow of death, with compassion and empathy and to draw strength and hope from the promise and glory of life eternal for those who were with Christ in life and who have gone on to be with Christ in the life that follows. We grieve with hope, aware of our human loss, but trusting that a larger, God-inspired story is unfolding.

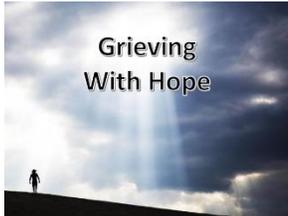
I speak of the promise of eternal life for those in a personal relationship with Christ. For a few moments, let us delve into what living a life of faith, in a personal saving relationship with Jesus, looks like. To do so, I want to use the parable of the ten bridesmaids to illustrate. This parable from Matthew 25 speaks of what life lived as a believer is like in the here and now should be like and what the kingdom of heaven will be like one day. Reading from Matthew 25, verse 1 through 13:



1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9 But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' 12 But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

In this parable, some of the bridesmaids are ready and prepared and some are not. The lamp represents their lives. Each of the ten, much like us and all others in the world, has a life entrusted to us. It is up to us how we choose to live our life – whether by faith or not. The oil represents our faith. Some of the bridesmaids had some oil in their lamps, but not enough to get them through the night. In much the same way, some people today have some faith. They believe that there is a God. But they do not have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. They have not put their whole trust in Him, declaring Jesus the Lord of their life. They have not surrendered to His Lordship. They remain the one on the throne of their hearts. When crisis comes, they do not turn first to Christ. They look elsewhere to get through whatever life has thrown at them. But, like the five bridesmaids without enough oil, they are left wanting when

Jesus calls. They realize that the time has come, but they too will hear, “*Truly I tell you, I do not know you*”.



In today's world, we often put off or delay things. We procrastinate. One day we too will come face to face with Christ. As a pastor that I know is fond of saying that the mortality rate for human beings is hovering around 100%.

Death is inevitable for us all. It comes to us all. Like death, faith is something we simply cannot put off, hoping to one day have time to come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. To illustrate, a humorous story:

Arnold was cleaning out the attic with his wife when he came across a claim ticket from the local shoe repair shop. The date stamped on the ticket showed it was over eleven years old. He asked his wife, "Do you think the shoes will still be in the shop?" - "Not likely," his wife said. "But it's worth a try."

Arnold drove to the shoe repair shop and, with a straight face, handed the ticket to the man behind the counter. The man looked at the ticket and said, "Just a minute. I'll have to go look for these." He disappeared to the back of the shop.

Two minutes later, the man called out, "Here they are!"

"No kidding?" Arnold called back. "That's terrific! Who would have thought they'd still be here after all this time." The man came back to the counter and said, "They'll be ready on Thursday."

We cannot treat our faith like this, waiting until some time, waiting until almost the end. Unlike the man behind the counter, Jesus will not ask us to come back again on Thursday. Our time will be our time. We do not want to hear Jesus say, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you". Instead we want to hear, "Well done good and faithful servant". So, like the five bridesmaids who entered the wedding banquet, we too must keep our lamps full of oil, our faith always sure. Our faith must be tended to regularly and consistently. When we stand firm in our faith, holding true to our faith in the highs and in the lows, then our faith will surely bring us the hope and reassurances and all else we need at both the good and the bad times in this life.

Today I want to close with a story of hope, with a story of what dying with hope means. It is the story of a faith that sustains even in the face of death. It is a story shared by Brian Erickson about living and grieving with hope.

Nancy's son Tripp suffered from cystic fibrosis. As Tripp lay in the hospital bed in his final days, Nancy asked him if she could read Scripture to him to comfort him. She wasn't sure what to read to him, and he could sense that, so he told her to turn to page 1649. The numbers 16 and 49 were two of his favorite numbers, since Joe Montana was number 16 and he played for the 49ers.

Nancy flipped open her Bible, but it ended on page 1334. There was no page 1649 because the New Testament started over on page one. She was about to tell Tripp to try again, when she did the math in her head and realized that page 315 of the New Testament would have been page 1649, so she turned there.

There she found these words, from Paul to the Thessalonian church: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope". Tripp turned to his mother, his CO₂ level rising and his lungs failing, and he said, "Mommy, those are the sweetest verses".

While it is true that we grieve, that we often live in the shadow of death, we also wait for the dawn, for the future coming of Christ. This is the bigger picture, the God-inspired end game that we profess. At times we do grieve, but not as others do, for we are a people of hope. For our hope eternal, a hope built upon the eternal and resurrected Christ, we say thanks be to God. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) How have your experiencing of “grieving with hope” strengthened and encouraged you on your journey of faith?
- 2) Who do you know that is grieving, perhaps without hope. Pray for your family member or friend that they would find hope in Jesus.
- 3) Perhaps you have experienced grieving with hope several times. How could this be a ministry to others in our church or community?