

All Saints Sunday  
November 4, 2018  
John 11:32-44

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## **Raising the Dead**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

First, let me apologize. I fully meant to include the people bereaved by the violence at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh last Sunday. I was so focused on confirmation that it didn't occur to me at the right time. Still, perhaps we can make up for that this morning. And of course God knew what was on our hearts even if not expressed last week explicitly in our worship.

My own grief over this—the worst act of violence against Jews in our nation's history—has only deepened this week. The Interfaith Memorial Gathering at Beth Shalom on Tuesday evening both brightened and saddened me. It was glorious to see so many people there; the parking lots and street spaces were filled for a block or more in every direction. And that was as it should be. Acts of support and solidarity are so important as communities grieve and work together to seek positive ways forward. But it also sharpened for me the anger at the horrendous directions of public discourse and my heartbreak over the violence that affects not only our long-time friends at Congregation Beth Shalom next door, but us all.

In this morning's gospel, we hear words that resonate. Lazarus had been dead for four days, and there was a terrible stench. Well, civility has been dying for years. Racism has festered for centuries. Anti-Semitism has decayed the hearts of people for millennia. White supremacy and white nationalism are yet again rearing their exceedingly ugly heads. There is a terrible stench! This all stinks to high heaven. And there is an urgent and profound need for resurrection.

I'm planning to do something this morning that is intended to make multiculturalism and mutual support among peoples integral to our worship. We will lift up those who were murdered in recent days for being Jewish or Black as saints in our prayers for this All Saints Sunday. You will see that their names are listed alongside those of our members who entered the Church Triumphant during the year.

Just in case you aren't familiar with the events. It was two weeks ago today that a white man walked into a grocery store near Louisville, Kentucky, shot and killed a black man—Maurice Stallard, and then walked back out into the parking lot and shot and killed a black woman—Vicki Jones. This was not a random act of violence. Video surveillance footage shows that just a few minutes before he went to the grocery store, the killer had tried to enter a predominantly black church but found the doors locked. Killing black people at the grocery store was his second choice. He would have preferred to kill black people in their house of worship.

Then, a week ago Saturday, another white man armed with 3 handguns and an assault rifle walked into a worship service at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and shot and killed 11 people, injuring even more. Those murdered for their faith were: Joyce Fienberg, Irving Younger, Melvin Wax, Rose Mallinger, Bernice and Sylvan Simon, Jerry Rabinowitz, Richard Gottfried, Daniel Stein, and Cecil and David Rosenthal. One of those murdered was a survivor of the Holocaust. That seems rather poignant to me—that she survived the terrors of Naziism only to succumb to the terror of white nationalism in this country.

When Gregory Bush walked into that grocery store in Kentucky and when Robert Bowers walked into that synagogue in Pennsylvania, they came out of hate; they came to bring death, not life. In today's gospel, Jesus walks into Bethany to bring life from death. He came to offer a resurrection.

This plague of violence against those whom we are called to love and serve as our neighbors hits close to home. Three years ago, a young white man named Dylann Roof walked into an African American congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, and actually sat in a Bible study with church members for about an hour before shooting and killing nine of those church members. This hits home because Dylann Roof had been confirmed as a Lutheran Christian. It hits home too whenever Jews are murdered, because the later writing of Martin Luther were painfully anti-Semitic. They laid part of the ground on which Naziism was built and in which many Lutherans were complicit.

And so, I sincerely hope that remembering these recent public martyrs for faith helps us all acknowledge the good, the love, and the grace given flesh in these members of our extended community. I hope it will help us to remember that not only our actions, but also our words and our thoughts can have profound impacts for good or for evil. I hope we will learn to speak the words and do the deeds that may, in light of today's gospel, raise the very dead.

What do I mean by that?

Well, let me tell you a story. It comes to me through a friend who is now a Lutheran pastor, Martin Malzahn and from his father, who was a pastor in this synod. It is about goodness found and goodness practiced in love, written by Christopher de Vinck (*Finding Heaven: Stories of Going Home*, Loyola Press):

Many years ago when I was a lonely man I met a woman, Rosemary. Everyone called her Roe. I invited her to my home to meet my brothers and sisters, and to meet my mother and father. One of my brothers, Oliver, was blind, mute, born without an intellect and confined to his bed for 32 years. When it was time to feed Oliver dinner, I stepped into the kitchen and began preparing the food. Roe followed me and watched. I found his red dinner bowl in the cupboard, placed it on the kitchen counter, and reached into the refrigerator for milk and eggs. I asked Roe if she would peel a banana as I pulled a box of oatmeal baby cereal from the pantry.

“Is that what your brother eats?” Roe asked.

“Yep.” I said. “Here, watch.” I broke the egg and poured the white and the yoke from the shells into the bowl. Then I shook the baby cereal into the mixture, mashed up the banana and scraped that into the bowl, and poured in warm milk, and then I stirred the goop. “I know it doesn’t look very appetizing, but Oliver loves this.”

Roe and I walked up to Oliver’s bedroom, which was at the top of the stairs, the first room to the right. The walls were yellow, the window curtains a pastel shade of yellow, and Oliver’s blanket was a light brown. His head rested on his pillow. His lifeless, twisted arms rested outside the edge of the blanket. As I sat on the side of the bed to begin feeding Oliver, Roe asked me in a quiet and strong voice, “Can I do that?”

And so Roe fed Oliver his dinner, scooping up a bit of food on the spoon, lightly touching his lips, and then watching as Oliver opened his mouth. Roe gently placed the food into my brother’s mouth as his lips closed around the silver spoon. Roe fed Oliver his entire meal, then she looked up at me and smiled. I smiled too.

When I saw how comfortable she was with my brother, when I saw how kind and gentle she was, I was given clear evidence that this young woman possessed qualities that I did not even know were the things that make for a substantial marriage, but I did see how lovely she was to my brother. Six months later Roe and I were engaged, and today we are celebrating our 26 years of marriage, and we have three children.

During the first months of our courtship, I asked Roe how it was that she felt so comfortable tending to my disabled brother. I told her that many people were uncomfortable when they met him for the first time.

“Chris,” she said, “my mother was dying from cancer. It was diagnosed incorrectly. The doctors thought she had an ulcer when in fact she had invasive stomach cancer. I took care of her during her illness and during her dying. I bathed her and fed her. I loved her very much. After tending to my dying mother, it was very easy to feed Oliver.”

Goodness pursues goodness. Roe tending to her mother gave her the easy strength to tend to my brother, and Roe being so gentle and kind to Oliver demonstrated to me that she had significant qualities that I admired in a woman. See the domino effect of goodness?

Do you rake leaves in autumn? After the afternoon’s work do you look back over the lawn and think, “Hey, that looks nice”? Why do we listen to Mozart from century to century? What is hidden in the paintings of Picasso or in the words of Faulkner? We are the only creatures on earth that have the ability to look back over experiences and draw conclusions...

Goodness is like an investment for the future: our own and the future of those we love. Every act of goodness, every act of kindness has an unrealized consequence waiting for us, or for those we surround with goodness.

Each day we are confronted with a choice: to choose goodness or to choose what is not good. Each time we make a decision, small or large, to choose good, we build a home, or a school or a book or a symphony in our lives that can be read in the future, that can be lived in, that can be heard when we are nearly incapable of hearing any longer.

How could Roe possibly have known that in her goodness as she tended her dying mother she was preparing herself to feed a disabled, blind boy with ease and tenderness, and how could she possibly have known that a young man would be watching over her shoulder and thinking, "She is the one for me"?

We choose to be good because we believe we are building something: a home, a relationship, a path to heaven, laughter in the evening when a daughter is in her pajamas sitting on your lap telling you all about her day with Billy down the street who found a turtle and how much they loved that turtle.

Without goodness, we do not have a photo album in our hearts to look back upon with glee.

Oh, when we grow old there is a sadness for our lost beauty and vigor, a sadness for the death of those we loved. But there is also that delight in that sense of longing for that day at the lake when we were in love and the loons laughed their silly laugh and all summer stretched out before us in eternity.

In our old age we have the ability to look back with gratitude, to look back to all that was good and holy in our lives and say, "Amen," or "Ah me," or "Well that was a life."

We choose goodness because we know that grief cupped in joy and stillness is the reward at the end of a long day or a long life, and such joy and such stillness come from the accumulation of saying, why yes, of course I will feed Oliver, why yes, of course I will rake the leaves in the backyard...

We are ... well, we are people who know the difference between joy and sorrow, and we tend to choose joy. That is why I try to be good. I want my children to live in the heritage of joy and stillness.

Life and resurrection come with small acts and words of goodness.

One of the readings at the Interfaith Memorial Gathering on Tuesday evening comes from the Talmud, and I hope it speaks to your hearts as it does to mine:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.  
Do justly, now.  
Love mercy, now.  
Walk humbly, now.  
You are not obligated to complete the work  
but neither are you free to abandon it.

Perhaps you can hear in those ancient words of Judaism also an echo from the gospel: "Lazarus, come out!"

Such are our Lord's simple calls that bring new life to the unmistakable stench of death that seems so pungent in these dark days. Do. Love. Walk. Choose the good. Do not despair. Keep the faith.

In closing, let me share the words of the final song we sang together on Tuesday evening. It speaks of resurrection by way of nurtured goodness in the face of evil and death. That is after all the way of all saints:

Where there is light in the soul, there is beauty in the person.  
Where there is beauty in the person, there is harmony in the home.  
Where there is harmony in the home, there is honor in the nation.  
Where there is honor in the nation, there is peace in the world.

The Hymn of the Day we now sing was written, as you will soon discover, for congregations as we share the grief of our Jewish sisters and brothers. May it too spark goodness among us and light in our souls. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.