

“Life Grows On”

The title of this sermon, “Life Grows On,” is also the name of our church’s Relay for Life team. Some of us will participate in the American Cancer Society Relay for Life next Saturday and Sunday, and we will remember and honor those who have fought the fight against cancer. Sally and John gave our team its name, and I think it’s so appropriate because our faith tells us that indeed “life grows on.”

On this Memorial Day Sunday we remember the complete circle of God in which all life finds its beginnings, endings, and new beginnings. I remember as a young child being in such a hurry to grow up. When we’re young and have so much to look forward to in the future, the years can’t seem to pass fast enough; we’re always eager for the next summer, the next Christmas, the next birthday. But then the day comes, later in life, when we might wish to slow time down a bit, but we can’t, because life just keeps growing on.

This much loved text from Romans tells us that in whatever stage of growing we find ourselves, we are inseparable from our Creator. Growing up can be tough; it has emotional and spiritual growing pains which accompany it. Even when our physical bodies reach maturity, it seems the growing pains of our spiritual life continue. Our inner life keeps growing within the circle of God.

The writer of this text, Paul, is an apt example of an evolving faith within the circle of God. First, Paul was a persecutor of the Christians; then he became a Christian missionary having experienced the Christ in a life-altering way. His spiritual growth was accompanied with travail; he, himself, was no longer accepted within Jewish life. And he had an additional ailment that seems to have made his work as missionary difficult both physically and spiritually. The theologian Kristel Stendahl puts it this way: “A sick apostle was not a good advertisement for the cause.” (*Final Account: Paul’s Letter to the Romans*) Yet, Paul has bet his life on his experience of Christ and Christ’s message. Thomas Long writes: He has dragged his frail body around the Mediterranean world -- braving shipwrecks and beatings -- to proclaim the gospel of a God who holds the Jews close to the heart and who summons the Gentiles to become adopted children in God’s own family.” (*Interpretation* 273)

This Paul is standing on the promises of God and a radical confidence that God is righteous. Long continues: “*The world is full of brokenness and pain, but that is not how it ends... ‘Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?’ No, that is not how it ends. ‘Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.’ (vv.38-39) That is how it ends. Paul says we can bet our lives on it....*”

But lest we think that “this is how it ends” is only a reference to an otherworld, remember that the circle of God’s creation has no beginning or end, and God cannot be confined to an ethereal place. “When the Russian cosmonaut declared that he had been into space and God was not there, few believers were concerned. Nevertheless, our language, our hymnody... reflect a pre-Copernican universe, the powerful human sense that God is “*above, up there, in heaven. When salvation is merely a on-way ticket out of life’s troubles, a promise that one will not be ‘left behind’ in a world of woe, such an image offers little motivation to care for God’s creation or to build community beyond the walls of the church.*”

Next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate that the spirit that comes to us within the circle of God and empowers us to reach outward, live fully, love faithfully. This is the life in which we rejoice, all the while knowing that nothing, now or later on, can ever separate us from the love of God.

Today, Memorial Day Sunday, also has special meaning for those whose loved ones have died. For some, these are veterans killed in wars ever since the Civil War when the first “decoration day” was celebrated as a day of remembrance. Some of you will go to cemeteries tomorrow and lay flowers and stay awhile remembering and praying. We also think about the citizens in foreign lands and in harm’s way. We cannot ignore what goes on in our world. If God comes down to earth in Christ and through the Spirit, we, too, cannot turn our sight away from what happens in our world.

Long-time friends of mine who live in Atlanta have a son in the military. He has been in Iraq and is going back to Afghanistan. My friends, Linda and Larry, have already grieved the loss of an infant son born in 1981, and now their adult son, Ben, is in harm’s way. During Ben’s tour in Iraq, his father who is a hospital chaplain, wrote this poem.

A Candle in the Window

There’s a candle in the window
For our soldier off at war,
Standing constant vigil ’til
His foreign tour is o’er.

The sentinel stands faithfully
Through day and dark of night,
Reminding all who look its way,
To pray for Freedom’s fight.

For safety and for courage,
And for wisdom do we pray;
That God may grant him all these things
As his Comrade day by day.

Now stand, O Candle, bright and tall,
Alert us all, each one,
That the price of freedom is not cheap,
And its battle not yet done.

So light his way and burn for him,
And for his safe returning;
Our love will be the fuel that keeps
Our soldier’s candle burning.

So today and tomorrow as you remember your loved ones, remember the words of Paul that *nothing can separate us from the love of God*. We’ve bet our lives on that! The circle of God is unbroken. We cannot escape the love of God that gave us our first breath and the love of God that will receive our last sigh. Let us be energized by life and love that grows on, ever changing, ever responsive, and always reaching out with ripples of possibility for God’s world.