

Perhaps only in death -- take one"
A sermon for vespers with a free range pastor
Sunday, October 28, 2018
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: John 11:1-44

Will you pray with me. God of the living and the dying, the believing and the unbelieving, help us to see the matter of death with new eyes. Help us to learn anew that it is perhaps only in death that we obtain true vision. Amen.

"Perhaps only in death do we obtain vision." Those words aren't mine. I first read them when I was in a Spanish class in college in about 1967. They come from a Spanish play we were reading for the class. I don't remember anything else about the play, its title or its message. But for some unknown reason.... those words jumped off the page of that little paperback Spanish play and stuck with me. I memorized them in Spanish and have pondered them over and over since my college days, more particularly since beginning seminary in 1995.

I suppose that resurgence of their meaning for me began when my mother died in 1993. With her death, my life took on new meanings in ways I didn't think possible. Many of you already know that story. My "vision" was radically changed after my mother's death. Maybe that's happened for you -- after the death of a loved one, a good friend, a trusted colleague. All of a sudden.... life is different for you, as it was for me, after my mother's death. "Perhaps only in death do we obtain true vision."

It's a thought that can go in so many directions and stem from so many questions.... Does it mean through OUR deaths we obtain true vision? Does it mean through the death of someone else we obtain true vision? Does it mean from death in general, or death as the end of life, that we obtain true vision? So many questions that can come from one thought, "Perhaps only in death do we obtain true vision."

It seems appropriate that I chose this text for our reflection today, as Thursday, in the Christian tradition, is All Saints Day, the day on which all the saints of the Christian church are remembered and venerated. This honoring happens more specifically in the Catholic tradition, but it does appear in the Protestant calendar also. The other reason my choice of text is appropriate is much darker -- eleven members of a Jewish congregation were murdered yesterday morning by a hate-filled man who came into their synagogue with deadly weapons so he could kill Jews. Among those murdered there were two middle-aged brothers, an elderly husband and wife and a grandmother nearing 100.

"Perhaps only in death do we obtain true vision." I have to admit it's hard to reflect on those words in the way I had planned before what happened in Pittsburgh yesterday morning. But, I'm going to try....

The story of the raising of Lazarus is one of the most well known miracle stories in the Gospels. Even though others stories of Jesus raising people from death do occur and are repeated in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story of Lazarus' raising appears only in the Gospel of John. That tells us that theologically, John felt it was very important -- both for *his* understanding of who Jesus was for him and who he *wants* Jesus to be for all who come after him.

It's a story that is thick with levels of possible meaning -- the traditional understanding is that it is another affirmation of Jesus' identity as the Son of God, the Son who was born, lived, and was crucified for the sake of all God's people. Verse 11:25 says, "Jesus said to Martha, 'I am

the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Only one other verse in the Gospel of John is more well known than this one. You know what it is -- you see it on signs at golf tournaments -- John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

For many Christians, these two verses sum up and simplify the entire Good News of the New Testament -- believe in Jesus Christ and eternal life is yours. Don't believe and eternal life will not be yours. The story of the raising of Lazarus is as much of a challenge for me theologically as is the John 3:16 passage because of the too often exclusionary caste they both give -- if you're not a Christian, you're not saved, you're doomed.

I know these passages give comfort to many Christians. I know they give written assurance that if one dies with Christ, they will rise again with Christ after death. I can certainly appreciate the power of these passages of the Gospel of John for many Christians. But I also have to tell you that for me personally, I believe they offer a misguided theology.... a theology that does nothing to help me make sense of the tragic deaths of eleven faithful Jews doing what they would do every Saturday morning in their synagogue. They would worship God as they understood who and what and how God was a part of their daily life, their families, every ounce of their being. How do the families of eleven members of their congregation now make sense of life? "Perhaps only in death do we obtain true vision." How do these families obtain true vision after such deadly evil has been thrown into their lives?

Jewish theologian, Abraham Heschel once wrote, "In Jewish tradition, dying in one's sleep is called a kiss of God, and dying on the Sabbath is a gift that is merited by piety. For the pious person, my father once wrote, it is a privilege to die." Piety is devoutness, reverence, religious devotion, goodness, faithfulness. The members of Tree of Life Congregation Synagogue in Pittsburgh were sharing their piety yesterday morning when a hate-filled, godless, evil man interrupted their worship with deadly force.... because he hated Jews.

Jesus was a Jew. May Lazarus meet those eleven members of Tree of Life with open arms. May we all renew our promise to love and to find in death our true vision.

Let the people say, "Amen."