

8/4/2007 Proper 12 C  
Colossians 3:5-17  
Luke: 12:13-21

The worst funeral I ever went to was my Grandmother's, my Mother's Mother. And let me be precise. It was not because it was the worst for my emotions, though it certainly was difficult. The funeral was the worst because it simply was the worst: poorly done, bad words said, no honoring of my Grandmother or worse, God. The first mistake, from my humble perspective, was that I and my family were not allowed to help plan the event. I was not allowed to function as a priest. My fundamentalist Aunt ram-rodged and railed against our ritualistic Episcopalian mumbo jumbo and hired another fundamentalist minister, not that I'm bitter. And my Aunt let me know this decision through the officially traded currency of the South, passive aggression. She told my sister to tell me that she thought it would be too emotional for me or us to be involved.

The service itself was only a grave-side one. Short and sweet, I thought. But the minister still presided over an hour long service on a hot summer day, in triple digit heat, with no tents and no breeze, no chairs, and no shade from any trees. We practically melted as salt water oozed from our pores as well as our eyes. To make matters worse, when the grave-diggers had begun to dig my Grandmother's grave before the service, they hit a water main. And so instead of committing my Grandmother to the watery deep lake and fountain that had formed in her own reserved slot, they slid my Grandmother over to an adjacent empty plot, right next to where my Mother is buried. The minister kept saying things like, "Here we commit you... dust to dust," but he really meant, "over there, when they fix the leak. And drain the water" The good reverend also, during his sermon, made an "altar call". Now, if you do not know what an altar call is, it is a time in a service, when people are asked, perhaps manipulated, to come forward and accept Jesus in their hearts, point being to avoid h-e-ll, not live a good and generous life. I was not amused. First, theologically, I thought it cruel to threaten people who are grieving with divine punishment, especially when I do not believe in such a thing. Secondly, my Grandmother was never very religious, though the minister kept saying that my Grandmother would want us to avoid the eternal fires. I kept thinking that with the heat, and his sermon, we already there anyway.

But then, the worst came. The minister wanted music. And so, he plucked some flowers off of my Mother's headstone and then plopped a big battery operated boom box right there on her headstone. There followed five minutes of silence as the pastor repeatedly tried to get his carefully cued cd to work. Frustrated, he practically kicked the headstone. But it would not play. It was the worst most uncomfortable moment, but it is probably the moment I enjoyed the most!

And after the service, no one talked to anyone, not even the minister. The family was already in the middle of a contested will with contested end of life issues, not to mention the funeral. It seemed like there would be no hope that day. No, no hope. Bad words, no loving God, failed family relationships.

And what I would like to talk about today is the point in my life that I faced in and after that dreadful funeral. In that moment, I faced a decisions of how to approach that service, and more

importantly, how to approach my Aunt after feeling excluded from sharing the real and abundant love of God in the context of real and present loss. And I want to talk about that moment not to rouse my own emotions but to address those moments in the context of situations we all face, crossroads in our lives, forks in the road where we have to choose to give into resentment, relish our victim-hood and pain, or try and find a peaceful, forgiving way forward for all involved. Sometimes, we do not even realize that we are making such a choice, but those moments are there, and how we choose to proceed often says more about our faith, our humanity, and our belief in God than anything else that we do.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a man at a similar crossroads, and yet the man does not realize it. In the man's mind, he faces solely the question of riches, what to do with all of his grain and his wealth. He knows that he has to make some decision, find some way forward. He does not even have a place to store all of his grain. The man builds a barn. Simple enough, he thinks. The man even says to his soul, "You are protected and safe with wine to drink and food to eat." The man believes that the crossroads before him is solely one of self-protection, but in reality, the crossroads before him is the same one that I faced at that funeral: Holding onto things, riches, events, pain that will not ultimately matter, or preparing for eternity and for God. The man had not even understood the question or his real options. The man therefore never prepared for God. He raised the barn and sadly bought the farm. And Jesus tells this parable to a man engaged in a dispute with his brother over property. And there, Jesus refuses to serve as the brother's Judge. It is out of his realm to make property decisions. Instead, Jesus deals with the real crossroads the brother faces, not the false one. Should the man go forward as an enemy to his brother because he did not get his due, or forgive?

Theologian James Alison suggests that there is a relatively transparent, though heart-wrenching process, to choose forgiveness. He claims that it begins with accepting in our hearts that God will never be at enmity with us, will never punish us, and never wants us to be at enmity with one another. God mirrors forgiveness and love to us, we are called to share it with others. The choice of forgiveness also involves accepting that we are never solely victims in this world, that we have the power to change our situations and to make the world and all of our lives more focused on the love of God, even if it is not as exactly as we would choose. And with those two things in mind and heart and body, the process finally involves us humbling ourselves to God, asking God for forgiveness for the paths we have taken that are not life-giving and praying for help to choose the ones that are.

In the end, there is only one crossroads that we all face: to love and forgive or not. Every choice, every decision, no matter how major or minor boils down to that crossroads and flows from our decision. War, enmity, disinheritance, will contests, and the anger, wrath, and malice that Paul mentions this morning all flow from the choice not to forgive and not welcome the eternal love of God. It all comes from a feeling of "not enough"... not enough things.. More importantly, not enough love. As the writer of Ecclesiastes says, it all ends up being vanity, about us, our own selves, instead of about the love of God and humanity. But peace, hope, charity, kindness all flow from the decision to work toward the love of God, not only for our lives, but the lives that come 10 generations from now. In my own case, after such a funeral and family strife, I can honestly say that such a decision, such a crossroads, such a place of choice, is not an easy one. It

takes work and many, many prayers, to sometimes even realize that we have a choice. And in all honesty, I do not speak to my Aunt. That seems the best way forward not to cause or feel any more harm. But I do work toward forgiveness, each and every day. And I hope that we individually and corporately also make such a choice... To forgive. Paul writes: Bear with one another... forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.