

Sermon: "As Sparks Through Stubble"

Scripture: Book of Wisdom 3:1-9

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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Do you feel peaceful and still? There are requiems that leave one breathless and have the drama of threat in them at death and Faure has been criticized for leaving out what some see as the most important part of a requiem mass which is the Dies Irae, the Wrath of God. But as the notes indicate - Faure said "people have said my requiem did not express the terror of death and someone else called it "a Lullaby of death" and that is how I feel death, a happy deliverance, a yearning for the happiness of the beyond, rather than as a distressing transition."

The choir asked that the performance of the Requiem this morning be dedicated to Stephen Cole who was a beloved member of this church and sang in the choir and was also the husband of the choir director, our Minister of Music and Arts, Jane Ring Frank. Stephen was raised up in a Christian tradition that emphasized the threat that death posed if one's soul wasn't right with Jesus and the Wrath of God loomed large. But for those of us who knew Stephen, his presence, his life held a spark of God that was anything but wrathful, instead gentle, loving, accepting. Interesting that the weight of that fire and brimstone upbringing forged a man of gold in many ways.

And as many of us know, Stephen had early onset Alzheimers and so faded away in a certain way over the course of his last years, a slow dying where the flame of his life flickered down until it went out...or did it? Might the transition to death be in reality, in truth, not the extinguishing of a flame as we, the living, tend

to experience it, but our life's flame that flickers through this existence finally catches fire at death and flares into greater life? Maybe that's what happens at death, maybe that's more what happened to dear Stephen Cole and Vandy French and Bruce Lauterwasser and Asako Burr and Jena Roy and John Sawyer and all of our beloveds who have died and crossed that veil. To quote a Rainer Rilke poem, maybe they flared up like flame and their lives beyond this life make shadows for us to move in. I am saying nothing new. It's the faith and witness of Jesus Christ, that at his death he did not flicker out and away but flared up like flame and our world has moved in the shadows of that great light for 2000 years now.

The martyrs and saints who across Christian history have been commemorated on Nov 1st were understood as those who were so consumed with the love of God and the desire for Jesus Christ that their lives were literally a conflagration of that love. And then All Souls on November 2nd is the honoring of all the dead, those whose lives were in their own unique and particular way still an expression of God's love and light, each a reflection of God's holiness, as God's image was therein, the light, the flame of God in each and every one of us.

I love that passage that Tracy read from the book of Wisdom that refers to the dead in God "as sparks through stubble" or in other translations, "they run as sparks through reeds". It's such a vivid image, sparks through dry reeds, it means they can ignite the fire within us as well. And that is an image for those we love who have died that I want to hold onto and sit with; that even in our grief for who we've lost, even as their presence feels painfully like absence, they are still sparks through our lives, creating shapes and shadows that touch our minds and our hearts, not just our memories, but actually impact who we are and where we go

and what we do or don't do and ignite into flames at times our own God spark within us. Maybe our loved ones who have died are not so far from us as we tend to believe but are touching and igniting and surrounding and protecting and inspiring and even helping to orchestrate our lives as we move within their shadows.

We are such individualists. We have this fantasy that we are independent and autonomous. We have this tragic and misguided belief that ultimately we are alone. But we are not. The boundaries of our SELVES are much more porous than we imagine, expanding further outward than is evident and the intersection of ourselves with other selves remarkably intersecting and inter-coursing and that is true of the living and it is likely true of the dead too and true of the living and the dead in relation to one another.

The disciples were devastated in grief at the death of Jesus and Jesus explained to them – “this must happen and then I can be present to you and the world in a whole new way.” Could it be that those who have meant so much to us in our lives and have died are simply gone from us? Relegated to memory. I really don’t think so. We are far too connected to one another, far too sourced in God, far too blessed with divinity in ourselves for death to sever us from one another. “O death, where is thy sting”, we rightly sing. It’s not there. I mean, it’s there, we feel the sting of death in a certain absence of our loved ones but in reality they are with us and one might even imagine smiling graciously upon us in our grief and far more connected and alive in our lives than we will ever know... until we ourselves cross that veil and join them there.

What we don’t know we don’t know about death and what we don’t know is a ton but across the millennia, the segment of humanity that has known Jesus

Christ has been assured that it's something like this – the living and those who have died together in Life with a capital "L" and we are invited to lean into that and trust in it.

We in the Protestant Church have come to embrace again All Saints and All Souls after the reformers railed against praying for the intercession of the saints and praying for and with the dead, insisting that such practices presumed that Christ's intercession was not enough. No it's all about Jesus, put that out of your head. But what a loss. Because those don't have to be mutually exclusive at all. The Body of Christ is greater than any of us could possibly know containing the living in all quarters of the world and the dead too, in all quarters of heaven.

May we notice our beloved departed as sparks amidst the stubble of our lives, igniting the fire of God within and creating shadows for us to move in... in Jesus' name.

Let's pray together. If you'll respond to each petition with the words as they are on the screen – "God of this world and the next, redeemer of all, hear our prayer."

For all our beloved departed, especially Stephen Cole for whom this requiem is offered this morning, we pray: "God of this world and the next, redeemer of all, hear our prayer."

For those who have died alone and unknown, nameless ones, who have not had family and friends who surround them in love, we pray: "God of this world and the next, redeemer of all, hear our prayer."

For those who have died due to human violence in warfare, on the streets, in over-crowded prison systems, as victims of domestic violence, we pray: "God of this world and the next, redeemer of all, hear our prayer."

For those whose despair for the world and their lives therein grew so great and the darkness so unbearable that they chose to take their own lives, we pray: “God of this world and the next, redeemer of all, hear our prayer.”

For all those who miss the ones who have died, who ache at their absence, that they may sense the presence of their loved ones anew in You, we pray: “God of this world and the next, redeemer of all, hear our prayer.”

For our country as we enter this election week that our democracy will be strengthened and that your grace will extend from winners and losers, the left side and the right and everywhere in between no matter the results, we pray: “God of this world and the next, redeemer of all, hear our prayer.”