

Sermon for Nov. 12, 2017 – “No Greater Love..”

32nd Sunday in OT, Year A – Texts: John 15:9-17

Rev. Jeff Colarossi, Westwood First Presbyterian Church

Holly Brutts just couldn't bring herself to let go of her son whose broken body lay before her in a hospital room. Her 20-year-old son, Nicholas Brutts, had been fishing with a friend. They were walking back to his car well off the side of the road when he was hit by a car. A car driven by a heroin addict who was high on heroin at the time. Nicholas, “Nick” to his family and friends, had sustained massive head trauma. There was no brain activity. Nurses kept telling Holly that Nick had no chance of survival, still, Holly said she couldn't bear to stop fighting for her son's life. “I held his hand and I watched his face,” she remembered. “My husband and I stayed there and we held his hand.” How do I know this...? I was there. I knew Nick. I actually knew him pretty well. He was a confirmand at my previous church in Pottsville. We won a chili cook-off with chili we made together. He volunteered at the church. I knew Nick's family, his mom, Holly and his dad, Rob. I knew his sister Noelle, who I also confirmed. I knew his brother Ryan and his wife Amanda. I baptized their son, Nick's nephew, Connor. I had done youth ministry for over 10 years and I have known lots of young people. No one impressed me more than Nick. Funerals are never easy, but Nick's funeral was perhaps the hardest thing I ever had to do.

Two things that have occurred to me over the years as a pastor in light of what I've seen and experienced. First, that there's as much mystery about life as there is about death. And second, that we never really treat either of these realities with the respect that each of them deserves. We try to skirt the issues or gloss over them. Death has become something to fear, something we mustn't talk about lest it turn its gaze toward us. Still life demands answers and we seem to look constantly for them. But life's questions and challenges, its pain, hopes and triumphs all seem beyond us. Nevertheless, we search. We constantly look for answers, though at times they are just that, answers – not solutions. Answers are not solutions, only ways to them. And, in order to move toward solutions, we need life. We need life even in the middle of hardship, grief, and pain. Without life there can be no answers. No solutions to life's problems and challenges.

Part of the searching, part of the coping with life's hardships was the Church's emphasis on “life after death.” The paradise that awaits us. The idea that we need to worry less about the here as we do the hereafter. After all, pain is only temporary. Things will be better in heaven. An old proverb used to say that “the heavier the burden, the brighter the crown.” Things like that have justified so much pain, but they're complete and utter nonsense. And sadly, they continue to echo in our churches. For the church, it's important to live in the understanding of life taught by Jesus.

In chapter 10 of John's gospel, He uses a metaphor for death. He refers to it as a thief in the night. And it is. Death is like a thief, a wolf; cunning, waiting, watching to snatch its next victim, approaching unaware, victims largely unprepared, here one minute, gone the next. Just like that! Indiscriminately choosing its victims, young and old alike. But, doesn't the death of a young person seem more cruel? No parent should have to bury their child. This is something of which the families of who have answered their nations call to serve their country are keenly aware. Likewise, with those who answer the called upon to donate a loved one's organs after an unexpected death. The “world” has caved in, life has been lost, the future denied, and anguish is all consuming. There's no easy way to approach people in the midst of tragedy as I have learned. It's a very personal thing. The right words are never easy to come by. I mean, the “miracle” of transplants is one thing; our having the vocabulary to address grieving survivors is another. We've yet to have the precise language, the particular words to adequately convey the transplant message except on a pathway that remains incomplete. It is almost solely through confronting reality, confronting life and death with courage and sensitivity, that we can have the language to match the progress made in the science of transplants.

I think the same is true as we become even more aware of the problem of PTSD – post traumatic stress syndrome. In both cases, the science will continue to develop. It must. So, too, must our awareness, our understanding, and our ability to talk about it. Especially in the context of the Church. We need to be able to talk about it in the language of faith, the language of God, because with each new day we must realize that we’ve a standing invitation from God to do something positive because what we do now echoes in eternity. God’s mercies are new every morning and so each and every day we have an extraordinary opportunity to give a magnificent gift. James’ letter reminds us that **“every good gift and every perfect gift is from above...and comes down from the Father of lights...with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth...That we might be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures.”** And, I think it more than appropriate to talk about this today as we remember the courage and sacrifice of our veterans and those who have made the decision to become organ donors. My feeling is that that **courage** and **sacrifice** are the threads that run through both as we worship God who strengthened them and made that sacrifice possible. Still, the word “sacrifice” evokes different responses from people and, generally speaking, the concept of sacrifice is foreign to many Americans, especially the younger generation. So, we do well to remind them, and ourselves, of the sacrifice of soldiers and their families even those who’ve not been called upon to give that “last full measure of devotion”. Think about it...How many soldiers have lost time away from their families? How many missed graduations? Little league games? Birthdays? Births? It boggles my mind. Personally, though it most certainly would’ve done me a world of good, I’ve never served in the military. Now, I registered for the draft back in the day mainly because I was legally required to do so. But, back then and even to some extent now, I’ve never completely understood why young men would willingly join the military in time of war, or peace, especially peace. But that’s exactly what Nick Brutts did. In the Fall of 2013, he joined the Army Reserves. He served in the Army Reserves for six months. After that, in June of 2014, just 2 months prior to the accident, he transferred to the Navy. He’d just returned from completing his basic training. This young man was fully prepared to sacrifice his life for his country. He never got the chance. A sad story indeed. But, it doesn’t end here. Because you see, Nick Brutts was an organ donor and a number of his organs, his kidneys, liver, corneas for sure, were harvested and they went to save a number of lives. If memory serves, it was something like seven or eight. One of them was his father, Rob. Yep, you heard that right. Nick’s father received one of his son’s organs, a kidney. It saved his life. Once again, I was there. I will never forget the family’s reaction when they said it was a match and that the transplant could happen. I will never forget speaking to Ron when he woke up from the surgery. This was, as you might imagine, an incredible experience. One that began in the heart of an extraordinary young man. It is as our Lord Himself said, to be honest I like the King James version here best, “Greater love hath no man...”

Today, we certainly remember the sacrifice veterans have made “who”, as the song “America the Beautiful puts it, “more than self their country loved...and mercy more than life! Indeed, we remember them. We owe them that. And while we may never be called upon to give our lives for others, nevertheless, we’re still able to give the gift of life by being an organ donor. I am. It’s incredibly easy to do. And, most major faiths...Catholic, Protestant, Jews and Muslims, not only approve of it – they encourage it! And in case you were wondering, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) absolutely encourages it. Our resolution states, “recognizes the life-giving benefits of organ and tissue donation...And thereby encourages all Christians to become organ and tissue donors as a part of their ministry to others...” So, there you have it. It’s certainly an individual choice. How many of us here are organ donors? Thank you for your thoughtfulness! For those who may still be on the fence I offer a paraphrase of a quote from the Jewish Talmud...“Whoever saves a life, saves the whole world.” Death, especially our own, isn’t something we love to talk about but only one man has been able to escape it. And for that reason alone death need not be the final comment of our lives. Instead of one stone marker at the head of our grave there could be living memorials. Real people with real families whose lives have been reunited though the gift of life. This is what Christianity is at its core. This is truly living the gospel. Sharing one’s own life for the purpose of helping someone else. Contributing to the legacy of life. An act of unselfish life like those who gave their lives on battlefields all over the world to protect the lives of others.

Consider the number of lives Nick Brutts saved. How many lives might your gift save? Such a gift is truly treating life and death with the seriousness each demands. It is, in a sense, a celebration of life itself...Another act of creation.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.