

How Life Keeps Going and Whom We Owe: Braving for Dignity

Matthew 27:57-61 and Hebrews 12:1-3

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Today is several months away from our observance of Good Friday, when Jesus was crucified; but we nevertheless this morning read five verses from Matthew, chapter 27, which narrate the burial of Jesus after his body was lowered from the cross where he had been subjected to an excruciating death. I am emotionally moved in reading and hearing these verses, as much as when I read a novel's pages or see a stage, television, or movie scene at a graveside when there's a burial, or a disposition of cremains. Something about saying good-by, about mentally and emotionally rehearsing memories in one's mind, about profound sadness in grief and gratitude for gifts during life which have been enrichingly shared and received – something about that is gently magnetic to my attention.

Today is the first Sunday following November 1, which is All Saints' Day, also known as All Soul's Day. It's the Sunday we of First Presbyterian-Bryan honor individuals who have died, and particularly honor certain ones by calling their names in remembrance – church members or participants who have died since November 1 of 2021. It's also important for the preacher to realize that the liturgy and the memories of many present for worship are so strong that the preacher does not have to say very much. The word "liturgy," from the ancient Greek, means "the work of the people," or "the public work," or "the work that is shared by many." When we today at worship remember certain ones now deceased who have influenced you and me over time, and if the Scriptures and hymns are strong to shoulder and carry the focus of the worship service, the preacher needs not say very much.

A kontakion is a brief moving liturgical song from the Orthodox Christian tradition, as far back as 15 centuries ago. In 1969, South

African author Alan Paton published a memoir of his wife two years after she died in 1967. He entitled the memoir, "Kontakion for You Departed," and central to the 140 pages of remembering his years together with her is his recitation of the 1600-year-old song from the Orthodox liturgy. Translated to English, "Give rest, O Christ, to your servant with your saints, where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting. You only are immortal, the Creator and Maker of all life; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, given breath and spirit from you, and still unto earth shall we return. We here stand at the grave, this most difficult place, reminded of our mortality and of your immortality. Yet here to you we also make our song, 'Alleluia! Alleluia! Thanks be to you, O God.'" (p.22). A kontakion – a mourner's song – yes, for the departed, but also for those of us who survive and move on. Life does not end at the grave of another. There is more. Eternity in some form for them. Time and eternity for those of us who survive and move on. Maybe the question is "how do we move on?" I think the "how" may be answered with four elements: (1) remembering; (2) reviewing; (3) sorting; and (4) serving anew. Once more: how do we move on? (1) remembering; (2) reviewing; (3) sorting; and (4) serving anew.

The second Scripture passage read today is from Hebrews, chapter 12, the first 3 verses, with the famous line, "We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ..." Imagine a science fair project when you were in 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, or 8th grade. Your premise is that players are on a football or soccer field. The stadium itself is horseshoe shaped. Your science fair project is illustrating how people and time move along. A pull rope is connected with three strands to the horseshoe stadium and field: one strand to the stadium

front left; on strand to the stadium front right; a middle strand to the center-point end of the playing field. God would be the pull-force on both the stadium and playing field. Players are on the field until they retire to the stands. Once in the stands, there's no returning to the field, but there is cheering, encouraging, and praying from the seating areas for those players who are, during their lives, engaged on the field. And God tugs them forward by the pull-rope through the years in the mystery of God's presence and influence. "We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."

And one more illustration source which is not Scripture or church liturgy. Seven years before William Shakespeare died in 1616, he published 154 sonnets, which are 14-line poems on particular subjects. Sonnet # 12 is known for its "procreation theme." Rather than read Shakespeare's Sonnet #12, I'll describe it. The theme is the passing of time and our growing older with time's passing. In addition to mentioning the graying of hair with age and the waning of strength, the poet includes a comparison to the changing of seasons in nature from late spring into summer, and then to autumn and winter. The poet then describes death's inevitability and suggests that the only defense in creation against death is to breed! And breeding is actually the way creatures oppose death's winning in the long term. What arrests my attention, in the British word-use, is the word "brave" as a verb: "Breeding is the only defense to brave against Time's (or Death's) reaping scythe."

Perhaps Shakespeare is correct about the importance of breeding. Charles Darwin and other scientists certainly agree. Think with me though about the importance of "brave" as

a verb. When we stand at the grave of one who has died, when we have a memory, a tear, a smile, a grinding of the teeth in recalling someone who has died, isn't it most important to sense how **we are called** – still on the playing field – to brave whatever is threatening the sacred, to brave whatever is threatening the good, to brave whatever is threatening the loving, to brave whatever is threatening what is justice for all, to brave whatever is threatening the uplifting of the downcast, to brave whatever is threatening the celebrating of what's holy, caring, and strengthening in relationships.

Given the printed title today, "How Life Keeps Going and Whom We Owe: Braving for Dignity," life keeps going maybe through breeding, but in a wider and deeper sense, life keeps going as we all owe God; and we owe those who have lived life "braving for dignity" before us. We owe all those who have lived life braving for dignity with us, and have died, and we owe those who will survive even us. Yes, we all owe God who plays and serves and makes life new for dignity across the centuries; and we owe others who brave for dignity, whether older or younger or about our age. Let us brave for dignity still, as others have been our mentors and team-mates and, on occasion, our opponents. Let us brave for dignity and again come to this table for refreshment hosted by Jesus, the great Braver for Dignity who is our teammate and model and guide. And then, of course, we'll pray and depart, because there's more braving for dignity to do, honoring God and honoring others whom we always owe, serving as we do, amid so great a cloud of witnesses. – All honor and praise be to God.