

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Year A, Lectionary 27

October 2, 2011

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

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What will the epitaph on your grave marker say?

My great-aunt Helen lies buried at Forest Hill Cemetery just across Woodland Avenue, and I often drive by her maker when I am there, sometimes stopping. While there, I note the varieties of shapes and sizes of the markers; some are very large while others are so small as to be hardly noticeable. I wonder about the people lying under those markers. Were the ones with large stones more accomplished and more successful than those with small ones? A superintendant in the United Methodist Church—equivalent to a bishop in our ELCA—writes about a visit to Author's Ridge, a graveyard in Concord, Massachusetts. One large headstone

was the size of a small billboard, and the inscription is a recitation of his professional accomplishments and the organizations he served. It's more like a job application or a résumé than a memorial. If an anthropologist stopped by in 500 years, I wondered, what would this stone tell him or her about this man? What did he most value? To what did he bow down? Was it to achievement, career, success, prestige and position?¹

By way of contrast, the writer talks about another marker in the same cemetery. It's a small white stone the size of a large brick, with the simple inscription, "Henry." There lies one of the greatest thinkers in our American history, Henry David Thoreau, who found his calling at Walden Pond with the mantra, "Simplify, simplify."

I'm reminded of another simple marker at Forest Hill. It's a small rock, not cut or polished like most grave markers. The name of the deceased is inscribed, simply "Michael." Michael Wuchter, senior pastor at First Lutheran Church in Duluth until his untimely death on a mission trip in Africa in 2000, was one of the most learned and eloquent of preachers I have ever heard. There are many things his widow might have put on his marker: distinctions, awards, degrees, congregations served. But it simply says, "Michael."

The writer of the article describes another marker at Author's Ridge cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts. It's for a man who had been a pastor. It is small and simple, and the inscription is from the prophet Micah: "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

I was struck when I read that, as Micah 6:8 was also the mantra of Michael Wuchter: “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” Michael died the way he lived: doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with his God.

What will the epitaph on your grave marker say?

If you’re looking for suggestions, you might start with the Apostle Paul. I have often said that, even if there were no gospels, even if we did not have the stories about the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, I would still be a Christian on the basis of the witness of Paul. His writings are a storehouse of suitable epitaphs: “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s”; “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice!”; “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”; “the One who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ”; “Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ”; “I can do all things through him who strengthens me”; or one of the verses from today’s Second Lesson, the verse that serves as our mission statement here at Concordia: “I want to know Christ [Jesus] and the power of his resurrection.”

Let’s take that last verse and shorten it: “I want to know Christ.” To know Christ is to know the power of his resurrection. “I want to know Christ.”

I think this is a remarkable statement from our Apostle. If anyone knew Christ, it was Paul. Though he did not know Jesus when he walked this earth, the risen Christ appeared to him in a dramatic way and turned his life around.

Paul’s life was turned around in such a way that *everything* that had gone before in his life, all his accomplishments, all of his status, was as *refuse*, was as *garbage*, was as *sewage* (to translate the word more literally), in comparison to knowing Christ. Paul is so boastful that he would put his credentials up against anyone’s: “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh—if anyone has reason to boast—I have more!” Then he goes on to list those credentials.

But all of them are nothing in comparison to knowing Christ. And yet he writes, “I want to know Christ.” If anyone knew Christ, it was Paul.

Apparently, there is more to knowing Christ than just knowing *about* him, as in reading a biography. There is more to knowing Christ than going to Sunday School or confirmation. There is more to knowing Christ than attending worship, though all of these things are important. To *know* Christ is to *become like* him.

I’ve shared this story with you several times before, but it bears repeating. My maternal grandfather was buried in Wisconsin the day after my first interview with the call committee from Concordia in May of 1999. I was privileged to preach his funeral sermon, and the verse Grandpa had chosen was from our Second Lesson for today from Paul: “. . . forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on

toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” My uncle, DuWayne, Grandpa’s oldest son, told me a story that related to this verse. Grandpa was teaching DuWayne to plow a straight furrow behind a horse that was pulling the plow. As he plowed, DuWayne kept looking backwards to see how he was doing. When he got to the other end of the long field, he looked back and saw that his furrow went this way and that way, with all kinds of crooked lines. When he returned to where Grandpa was waiting for him, Grandpa said to him, “Do you see that white birch tree at the other end of the field? Keep your eyes on that tree as you plow and don’t look back.” Then Grandpa recited this verse from Paul. So DuWayne did as Grandpa said, and his furrow was straight.

Grandpa chose this verse because it was a summation of his life: the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Grandpa’s eyes were on Jesus throughout his whole life, and everyone knew it. Grandpa didn’t have any degrees or accolades. He didn’t even graduate high school. He told me once near the end of his long life, with a smile on his face, “If I had it to do all over again, I’d do everything exactly the same.” (I’m not so sure Grandma would have agreed with that!) The point is that it wasn’t so much about the *events* of Grandpa’s life as it was that *Jesus lived in and through him*.

Let’s imagine we take a lawn chair and we sit under that white birch tree at the end of the field and we watch Uncle DuWayne plow the field. Now let’s imagine that we’re sitting in that same lawn chair, but we’re sitting on our grave plot, and we’re watching ourselves as we live our lives, coming, as all of us are, closer and closer to our final earthly destination. Where are we headed?

I’d like to change the image now so that our path is not so much straight as an arrow flies, but that it is a journey that takes us in all kinds of places, in all kinds of detours, with all kinds of interruptions. Where are those places, what are the detours, and who is interrupting us? Whose voice are we listening to? Who or what is pulling the strings?

Now imagine, as we sit in our lawn chair, that we are in a courtroom, and our lives are being judged. Both our First Lesson from Isaiah and our Gospel for today are judgment scenes, set in a courtroom. What is the criterion for judgment? The criterion for judgment is whether or not we are fruitful in our lives. In Isaiah, the Lord asks the question of the jury, “Judge between me and my vineyard. What more could I have done for my vineyard? Instead of yielding grapes, it has yielded wild grapes.” In the parable from our gospel, Jesus asks the religious leaders, “When the landowner returns, what will he do to those tenants?” The religious leaders pronounce judgment upon themselves, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time.”

Now imagine, as we sit in our lawn chair, that we are in a courtroom, and our lives are being judged. What is the criterion for judgment? The criterion for judgment is whether or not we are fruitful in our lives. What is the fruit? The Apostle Paul tells us: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22).

Now let's look back on our lives from the vantage of our lawn chair as we sit on our cemetery plot. Are the jogs, the detours, the interruptions in our lives in response to the call of the fruit of the Spirit, or are they for selfish ambition?

Every day, by God's grace, we have the opportunity to write our epitaph. The point is not so much what is written on our headstones as what is written on our lives. Do our lives point to ourselves or do they point to Jesus?

“Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.”

¹Clay Oglesbee, “Living By the Word,” *The Christian Century*, 20 September 2011, 20.