

Text: I Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-57
Title: Swallowed Up in Victory
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Four of my dearest friends were recently diagnosed with substantial health issues. One with prostate cancer, two with lymphoma, and one with leukemia. They're all my age or younger. They all have children. They're all at various stages of treatment, transfusions, and stem cell or bone marrow transplants. They've all given their lives to following Christ in love and service to young people and students. They are, without exception, some of the finest people I know. I love each of them and hate whatever toxicity or genetic twist is causing these tumors, this suffering, their blood to breakdown....

Many of you can tell your own stories. You know friends and family whose bodies are bent and broken by illness and disease. You've watched loved ones waste away from cancer and chemo. You sit with those who are trapped inside bodies and brain circuits that are malformed and malignant.

Or maybe it's your own body that's falling apart. You ache in places that you didn't know you had places. Your breath is shorter, your pace is slower, your strength is waning, and your thinking is not as sharp. You know life and health to be fleeting and fragile.

Whatever the case, it is understandable that we might long for a day when we would shed these shells that waste away and live on some spiritual plane where there is no longer any pain, or tears, or suffering, or death....

A few weeks ago, I went to two funerals for two friends from Roseland. I'd know each of the deceased for decades ~ one for almost forty years. As I sat with those grieving families I was reminded that for the poor life is often short and particularly brutal. Life expectancy in Cook County varies by as much as 30 years depending on where one lives. Both funerals hosted a cloud of witnesses who had passed on earlier due to gun violence, bad diet, limited access to adequate health care, mental illness, addictions, and the harsh toll that the street takes. I couldn't help but think of all the other funerals that gathered this community as from deep in our souls we sang,

*If anybody asks you where I'm going, where I'm going soon,
Tell 'em I'm goin' up yonder, I'm goin' up yonder, I'm goin' up yonder
to be with my Lord*

That posture would have made sense to the first century Corinthian church. Life was nasty, brutish, and short....

For many food was scarce, which in turn led to malnutrition and its complications. While the environment was less toxic, work was difficult and dangerous, and a lack of a medical knowledge meant that injuries, curable diseases and viruses could be fatal. Life expectancy was low. The mortality rate of infants and children was high. Death was

simply part of everyday life. Therefore, the hope of escaping the suffering and struggles of our physical bodies was not unreasonable.

There must be something better than this flesh and blood.

There must be something better than this death and decay.

There must be something better up yonder...

All of this was set against a philosophical backdrop that elevated the spiritual and denigrated the physical. There was a kind of dualism that saw the spiritual as a higher good, without blemish, and free from corruption; while the body was base, governed by appetites, and perishable. And therefore, the idea of a bodily resurrection was absurd. This imperfect casing is what we're trying to shrug off. These flawed bodies are what we're longing to leave. Why would we want to be resurrected?

Take for example, crucifixion, which was a staple of the Roman Empire. Its "justice" system employed strangling, stoning, and burning as methods of torture and execution, but crucifixion sent a particularly lingering message.

The Romans did not allow crucified victims, especially enemies of the state, to be buried. They were left on the crosses as their bodies decomposed in the sun and scavengers picked at what was left. These corpses were to serve as a deterrent, but they were also a vivid reminder that our bodies are disposable. The idea of a physical resurrection was abhorrent.

So, it is entirely fitting that the Corinthians had questions about the resurrection of the dead.

How would it work?

What would the bodies be like?

Our hope is to shed these perishable shells why would we want them resurrected?

A blogger that I follow is writing a series of essays entitled "Heresies I Have Loved." In his words these heresies are:

...beliefs and doctrines that are just beyond the pale. Nonetheless, they are attractive. They make sense in their own way. They are very close to the Gospel. Maybe that's what makes them winsome. Maybe that's what makes them dangerous.

In our text this morning Paul is trying to pull the Corinthians back to the mystery of the gospel. He is writing in response to early church heresies that elevated the spiritual and denigrated the physical. He's writing in response to ideas that

were close to the gospel,

were attractive and winsome in their own way,

but that weren't the gospel.

In the face of a spiritual/physical dualism Paul again affirms a bodily resurrection. And in doing so, "He's not advocating a zombie apocalypse." He's not talking about the resuscitation of decaying corpses. Instead he envisions the transformation of the body into a body that is no longer corrupted by the powers of sin and death.

Paul proclaims that we will be given “spiritual bodies.”

And while that’s sort of oxymoronic, like jumbo shrimp (How can that which is spirit have a body?), he goes to great lengths to describe the mystery or beauty of the resurrection of the dead. Paul employs agrarian metaphors and imagines the glories of the heavens in struggling to describe our resurrected bodies. As one theologian puts it:

Paul dares to imagine the transformation of the body – remade and renewed. The language that he uses to describe the transformation forms a stark contrast to bodily existence as we currently experience it – perishable versus imperishable, weakness versus power, dishonor versus glory, natural versus spiritual. Far from the image of decaying corpses, the resurrected body sounds glorious. It is not the epitome of disease or weakness, but the epitome of strength and power.

My first gig in “ministry” was working as a counselor at a church camp. Cran Hill Ranch was tucked between two lakes in the rolling wooded hills of northern lower Michigan. Kids came to ride horses, frolic in the great outdoors, and learn about Jesus. On my first night as a counselor I was in a cabin full of junior high boys who giggled at every sound they could generate and fought off sleep with all manner of silliness. I had no control. But at one point a boy asked out of the darkness if there would be skateboarding in heaven. I told him that he was probably onto something.

The resurrection of the dead that scripture proclaims is something beyond our imagination. The limbs and limitations of this life will be swallowed up in a glory that is reflective of the glory of the resurrected Jesus.

A Jesus who ate with his disciples and could be touched.

A Jesus who entered locked rooms and disappeared.

A Jesus who was both recognizable and unrecognizable.

A Jesus who was a spiritual body....

And that is to say that when Christ returns, when the dead are resurrected, we will all be “changed.” While our physical bodies are bent and broken by sin and death, our spiritual bodies will be imperishable and glorious. Bring on the skateboards!

Neil Plantinga writes that the promise of “spiritual bodies” is “marvelous enough for those of us who are now healthy, but think of what it means for those whose bodies now need repair.... If the body you are now driving is a junker, take heart. One day God will give you a new one.”

That may sound flip.

I don’t mean it to.

I don’t know what to say of my friends with cancer. I’m grieved, pissed, and absolutely gutted. They’re surrounded by friend and family, they’re seeing the best doctors in the country, there’s already been multiple trips to Mayo. They’ll receive the most current medications and cutting-edge treatments. And when those fail they’ll be in line for experimental drugs and try to hold out for more research. Love will be thick, prayers will be offered, and who knows how this will all turn out....

And yet, I also know that:

- Eventually our bodies will falter and fail.
- Eventually we all will die.
- Eventually these bodies will decompose.
- Eventually all that we have is the hope of resurrection.
- Eventually all that we have is faith in the resurrected Christ.

I know we like the idea of our spirits going to heaven. And there is biblical witness to suggest that in some fashion at death we are with God. But the hope of the gospels is that God in Christ has come and God in Christ will come again. And when he does the dead will be resurrected. Paul picks up on a passage in Isaiah and envisions a day when:

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces.
Isaiah 25: 6-8

Truth be told the resurrection runs rough shod over what seems reasonable and fitting. I don't want to hear about the resurrection from my doctor. I want the best of science and modern medical technologies. The resurrection actually leaves me with more doubt than clarity, more questions than confidence, but I don't know where else to hope. I don't know what else to long for. I don't know who else to trust. As Michael Gerson puts it:

Faith does not preclude doubt, it consists of staking your life on the rumor of grace.

I'm gonna stake my life on the rumor of grace, on the hope of the resurrection, on the victory of love over fear, light over darkness, and life over death.

So, dear friends, to add to the list that we've been building these last weeks:

- You belong to God in Christ.
- You are gifted for the common good.
- You are the Body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.
- You are loved in order to love until love wins.
- You are who you are in the triumphant light of the resurrection.
- You will be resurrected.
- You will be victorious over sin and death.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.