

## Left Behind

Revelation 21:10; 21:22-22:5

John 14:22-29

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

On this Wills Emphasis Sunday in the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.), I want to invite you, in a roundabout way and no matter your age, to write your last will and testament. The roundabout way begins with three questions that tend to preoccupy the minds of philosophers. The first question generally concerns how we know what we know. Theologians are preoccupied with a similar question: how we know what we know about God. The second question for philosophers is how to behave, the question of ethics. Asked with a theological spin, the question becomes: how are we to live in relation to the God in whom we believe?

But there is a “third branch of inquiry,” according to Harry Frankfurt, a retired philosopher of some renown from Princeton University. The third branch of inquiry is “concerned with a cluster of questions which pertain to another...fundamental preoccupation of human existence—namely, *what to care about*....” Here we are concerned not with ordering our relations with other people or distinguishing right from wrong or setting the limits of our moral obligations, as we are when we are thinking about ethics. “Rather we are led to this third branch of inquiry,” Frankfurt says, “because we are interested in deciding what to do with *ourselves* and because we therefore need to understand what is *important* or, rather, what is *important to us*.” To care about something is to be invested in it, to identify ourselves with it, to make ourselves vulnerable to what happens to it, for better or for worse. What we care about shapes our character and propels us to stand here and not there, to dare this and not that, to risk even our lives for the sake of what we care about. This is not the question of what you and I do in order to make a living: it is the question of what compels us to live the life we have been given by God to live.

Some of you stand at the beginning of your days, trying on things that you might care about. Others in the middle of what may or may not be “three score years and ten” are often compelled by various discontents to revisit the question of what you care about; or perhaps the one necessity of your life continues to be an adventure worth your life. If you have never asked yourself this question, one way to tell, at a glance, what you care about unwittingly is to do business with the bottom line: what do you spend on shelter, cars, tuition, clothes, health, books, beauty, security, liquor, leisure, gifts, art, savings and, of course, sweet charity.

Some would object and say we come closer to understanding the *importance* of “what we care about” by asking after our use of the time given us by God: the priceless aspect of our days. Here what we care about is often at the mercy of unwilling distractions and detours, turns in the road and twists in the plot that cross our lives with things clean contrary to the life we have chosen. Yet I also think of time spent doing what we do for the sheer love of orchids and African violets, murder mysteries or the sea, Bono or Bach, John Donne or Virginia Woolf, Rembrandt or Kandinsky (from whence does care these things come?). I think of interruptions which have found us entertaining angels unawares or commitments forged along the way by an unintended outrage that sends us marching for one cause and protesting for another not because we “ought to” but because we must, because we “can do no other.” In sum, the things we care about are the things that compel us, for reasons we do not always understand, to *lose* ourselves, *invest* ourselves, *risk* ourselves in all freedom and vulnerability.

Although if the truth be told, you and I will not understand what we have truly cared about until we reach the end of our lives and look back from the eternity that is God. So to the last will and testament and its accompanying narrative: the obituary. I see traces of what people cared about every time I read the obituaries. I think of the steadfast tenders of lighthouses, the philanthropists run amuck, the explorers cut short in their prime, the domestic worker who endowed a college. I especially remember an obituary in the New York Times that began, “Dr. Jan Jakob Smulewicz died of heart failure in New York last week at the age of 69. He was not famous.” Smulewicz had survived three death sentences in the concentrations camps and came to this country from Israel in 1957, where he “taught, wrote about medicine and revamped the radiology departments of three hospitals. He also helped those further down the medical ladder,” the obituary goes on, “encouraging orderlies to become doctors and cleaners to become technicians, and founded a program at Harlem Hospital to help local youths become X-ray technicians.” The obituary concluded, “Dr. Jan Jakob Smulewicz, of southeast Poland, Germany, Israel and Manhattan, lived a life worth noting not so much because he survived unimaginable horrors but because he gave meaning to his survival.” He gave meaning to his survival. You may not have agreed with what he cared about, but read Daniel Berrigan’s obituary today and then ask yourself: what do you care about?

Even more to the point in this post-Easter season when we turn our attention to the church: What do we care about as Christ’s church and how will the care that marks our lives together also change what we care about finally as individuals? Both lessons this morning address those who had been called out by God’s address in Jesus Christ and been

turned clean around by what the church cared about. The Gospel of John was written to a newly gathered community who cared, above everything else in their lives, about the gospel; cared that the news of death's defeat and love's victory would be let loose on the world. Likewise in the Book of Revelation, the elder John, exiled on the island of Patmos, was writing to a growing community of believers who would soon risk even their lives to get the gospel said in the world. A necessity had taken hold of them and impelled them, in the face of the death-dealing powers of empire, to say as Martin Luther would later say, "I can do no other." John and the elder John were writing to people for whom it would be unthinkable not to care about the gospel. Yet both addressed the very real fears, the misgivings of family and friends, the self-doubt that comes in the night to those whose convictions bring them face to face with death.

John is writing some sixty years after the Resurrection to second and third generation believers. Like us, they knew of Jesus by word of mouth and through the lives of men and women whose faith and courage were explicable only if Christ were alive. In the fourteenth chapter, John is putting questions in the mouths of the disciples that must have been on the lips of the early church: "Lord, we do not know where you are doing," Thomas says. "How can we know the way?" Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, show them the God in whose hand their lives are really and truly held. And Judas, not Iscariot, wonders why Jesus is known to them but not to the world. These are the questions of those on the precipice of caring about something important. You do not know where it will lead you; you want assurance; you wonder if you are mistaken.

In response, Jesus promises them a destination with him in the love that God is, saying, "I go to prepare a place for you." Jesus gives them hope. Then he commands them to love as he has loved, giving them the love he commands of them. And finally he assures them that they are not alone, that God is with them in the Spirit as God has been with them in the flesh, to teach them and remind them of the gospel that is worth their lives. Jesus gives them faith in the sense of giving them a God whose word they may trust.

The elder John goes on to imagine the destination of all whose care about the gospel will likely cost them their lives. It will be a city whose light is God and whose lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by the light of God and all will be included. When God and not Caesar reigns, there will be water flowing, fruit in abundance, and the healing of the nations. In the midst of a bloody, hateful, violent empire, God is gathering a community whose care is the gospel; who will invest and risk and lose their lives so that the gospel gets said.

We are heirs of the gospel that the church has gotten said for two thousand years, sometimes at the risk of her own life. We have been given the same promise of a destination in the love that God is, setting us free from our fears. We have been given the same command to love and are being sent out as witnesses to the love that is stronger than death. We have been given the same trust in the God whose Spirit accompanies us every step of the way, teaching us and reminding us of the Word that is our inheritance. What evidence will there be, in the end, that we cared about the gospel: that we lost ourselves, invested ourselves, risked ourselves for the sake of the witness we were given to bear?

So on this rainy Sunday designated by our denomination as Wills Emphasis Sunday, I invite you to write your last will and testament. You need not be old to do this because who knows how many days any of us will be given? Imagine yourself with literally nothing to lose, with all anxiety about the future behind you. Imagine bequeathing simply everything you are and have to the world you will leave behind. Then ask yourself: will what you cared about finally be evident in how you give yourself away? Maybe in the end, when the dust to which we have returned has settled, the will probated, our daily obligations past, maybe then will it be said of us, singly and as Christ's church, that we risked everything on the one thing worth our lives: on the love that is stronger than death.