

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
November 5 & 6, 2016
John Crosby
Thank God for Compassion | 2 Corinthians 1:2-7**

I knew I forgot something, some of you have already done it, but for the next six weeks we're going to try to do a better job of asking you to use those black pads—we have found that as people are traveling more and going to different services, sometimes it's hard for us to know when somebody is not here if it's because they're busy, or because something happened. If you would help us by signing those pads, that would be great. On Communion Sundays we just ask you to take one of those little nametags and write your first name so we can call you by name.

It's not an accident, you know, that Halloween and All Saints Day are in the same week. Sometimes they're just a day apart. Halloween started in Europe with the Druids as a Pagan celebration that would scare away the ghosts. The ghosts came out of their coffins one day of the year and people put on masks to say, "Nope, it's not me", or they lit bonfires to scare the ghosts, or they put a fire in every window and every door of their house that would keep the ghosts away. Well, when Jesus followers came to Europe, they did the same thing that they did with Christmas, they stole Halloween. They said, "We're not afraid of ghosts anymore. Let's make it a party". They had people dress up and celebrate the life of those who had died, because of their belief that they live forever—All Saints Day. On this day they remember and celebrate and connect in faith to the famous, the infamous, the normal, and especially to the ones that they love. We're doing that here today. It's about death, so it's not a *hey, happy wild* kind of time, but death is not the end of the world, and we need to recognize that and talk about it.

I had a couple of funerals this week and for once, I didn't have any responsibilities except to sit with Laura and support our friends. I didn't have to run things or say anything, so I had a chance to think about not just that person, but what these services are supposed to be like. The first funeral service that I can remember--I'm sure my parents dragged me to ones when Great Aunt Tilly died, but I don't remember any of that—was when I was out of college, I had just taken my first job working with high school kids. My best friend and I were working together having a great time, and then he got engaged to this beautiful woman, Janet. Janet was leading a youth bike trip in California, got to San Luis Obispo, and was hit by a car and killed. That was my first encounter with real death. So, by the end of that week we were in Indiana at the funeral service—I hadn't been a Christian all that long--and I just remember that it was pulled together by my youth worker. He said, "Most people think that we're going from the land of the living to the land of the dead. In reality, we're all in the land of the dying on the road to the land of living forever." And for some reason, this has been 40 years; it just turned a switch for me. I was 24 and it was like, *okay, I'm in the land where everyone is going to die, and I hope I'm going to the land where people live forever.* And that service, as tearful and as painful as it was, offered me a sense of hope.

I thought about it this week. I was at another memorial service and this one was really more of a mixed crowd. That is, in our day, we have lots of people who still go to church and who still love Jesus, and we have lots of people that don't, whose philosophies and life experiences take them far from Christianity, and they often are both together at the big celebrations: the weddings and the funerals. At the funerals, when they talk side-by-side, the messages sound different. Not bad, just different. So as I listened, I heard the Scriptures read and we sang Christian songs, but then I also heard poetry used to express things. Beautiful poetry. I don't know if you guys remember your *Ulysses*, Tennyson's *Ulysses*, where it says, "Death closes all: but something ere the end. Some noble work, may yet be done" (and the famous part), "Though much is taken, yet much abides; and though we are not now that strength which former moved heaven and earth, in which we are, we are; one temper heroic heart, weak by time, strong in will, to will and to act and not to yield." Powerful. It's in the same sentence as that poem that became famous a couple of years ago again, *Invictus*. Remember that? Unconquered. Where the guy says, "Beyond this place of wrath and fear looms the horror of the shade." These people are not sure about what happens after death. There is a sense that this is horror. "Beyond the wrath is the horror and yet the menace of the years shall find me unafraid. It matters not how hard the gate, how tough the scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." I love that. I think that's powerful. I think it's very different than the traditional Christian understanding of life, but I think this is a person who says, "I don't know what lies beyond. What's important, to me, is to become the captain of my soul. I am unconquered."

Folks who love these kinds of poems don't often know it, but they're stoics, modern day stoics. A stoic is not a person who does not express emotions; a stoic is a person who believes in the Greek philosophy of stoicism, which means that you don't know what happens, that probably after you die, there's nothing there. The key is what you do with this life in building your character, being true to yourself, fighting the good fight. Unconquered. All of these signals come together at memorial services these days, and the important thing for me as I walked away was not to think that folks who don't know church talk are Pagans or that they somehow are missing the boat. All of us are on a journey searching for meaning. All of us are trying the best we can. We're in it together and we need humility not to judge other people.

I think one of the great tasks of the church through the ages has been to teach people how to live in preparation for death. Not somber, but how do you live so that you're not afraid to die? That's the task of the church, and right from the beginning of the people that follow Jesus, the leaders were trying to teach them how to talk to God, and teach them how to pray in ways that offered hope in the face of death and comfort in the face of loss. That's what Paul talks about in the prayer that we hear today. He says:

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father our Lord Jesus. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so we can comfort others in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we

share in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

⁶ Our distress, is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you endurance in the sufferings we all suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know just as you share in our sufferings, you share in our comfort. [2 Corinthians 1:3-8]

This is how he wants people to pray in hard times. It's a different kind of prayer because it sounds so thankful and praising. It's a praise of comfort. That's not common in our lexicon, but the idea that Paul is trying to get across is we praise God for giving us hope that becomes firm, and the reason that hope becomes firm, Paul says, "Is because of Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ". He says the reason we have hope is because Jesus goes first. Jesus as God becomes human and He goes first. He shows us the emotions around death. He cries at funerals. He comes to His own death and says, *I don't want to do it. I don't want to die*, but He yields and when He dies, it's not the end of the story.

I love that in the service on Friday, Jody Phenow was in charge, and she said, "You know, Jesus never speaks of His death without talking about His resurrection." It is not a period it is a comma. Jesus says, "I am going and I am coming back. He is the companion and the guide. We praise God for hope in Jesus." But then Paul says, "And you have a part to play, too. We thank God for the comfort you received through Jesus so that you can give others the same comfort." So we can comfort others. Can I just tell you here's where I think the church falls down? I think often religious people are lousy comforters. We need to do better at this. Giving comfort is not explaining why this is happening, that's a religious thing to do. Giving comfort to someone is not spiritualizing a tragedy saying, "Well, God's will is mysterious, but this will all work out in the end." It may not work out in the end! It is not over-empathizing. Christian people drive me crazy sometimes—*oh, I know just how you feel*—oh no you don't, and even if you did, how stupid to say that! It's the sense that Paul gives here. Paul says, *I want you to receive comfort so that you can comfort others*. The people who really do know how you feel, they don't say *I know how you feel*, they come and they sit next to somebody and they offer comfort just with their presence, just by being there. By being hope-filled and just sitting there. They offer comfort through prayer.

I think the apostle Paul who wrote this was not a Rich Phenow; he was not a lovey dovey compassionate person. He had to learn how to comfort other people, and I think over his life he did learn that. He talks to the church in Rome, he introduces himself to the church in Rome, and he says, *you know, I have become absolutely convinced that there is nothing not in life or in death not in heaven or in hell not angels or demons there is absolutely nothing that can separate you and me from the love of God and Jesus. Nothing!* His hope is built on the idea that nothing can pull him out of Jesus' hand. I think you learn that. I don't think it comes naturally to anybody. I think he learned that and he talks about that just a few chapters before. He says, "I have learned to even be okay with sufferings. I give thanks for sufferings because I know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance gives me character, it builds character, and character offers me hope, and my hope is sure because God's love has been poured into my heart through the Holy Spirit." That's the comfort that Paul has. Not that he is saying, *oh, she*

ran away? She ran away? Well, let me tell you that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope. This will all be better. He doesn't say that to the grieving. He sits with them filled with hope. He says, "Hope does not disappoint us. Our hope is firm."

When I think of that, I think of hope that's like an anchor. It's a biblical illustration—our hope is like an anchor. At the end of Paul's life he is on a ship that is being tossed by a storm all the way across the Mediterranean. He said *as we came close to the shore we knew we were going to crash so we throw out one, two, three, four anchors and then we prayed all night.* Hope is like an anchor and then you pray all night. Small life. Small anchor. Small storm. Bigger lives need bigger anchors because there are bigger storms. The QE2 has a chain on its anchor that's 999 feet long. The anchor itself weights 45 tons. Big storms, brutal world. For those of you who are trying to have hope and bright hope for tomorrow, can I tell you something? You cannot build an anchor of hope in a wireless world. There is no such thing as a wireless anchor. You can have all the beliefs there that sit on the bottom, you can have all that great stuff on the bottom, but it will not get to you through Bluetooth. The thing about anchors is that they have to be attached. It doesn't matter how secure that anchor is, if it's not tied to you it will not help. The anchor of the soul comes with a mighty chain and that chain is called hope. Hope. The belief that no matter what happens, He will never leave. What does that look like?

I said there had been two funerals this week. I couldn't go to the other one—it was yesterday morning in Raleigh/Durham. It was for the wife of a friend of mine, Peter. He and I went through seminary together, and he met Lori there—that was the best part of his whole seminary experience—and Peter and Lori went off and did churches around the country, and we kept in touch. We were in a group that met, and six months ago Lori got cancer and they talked to us and said, "Pray for this. Pray for this. We're going to fight this hard", and they fought it really hard and on Halloween she died. Peter sent me a note, sent those of us who are in this small group a note. He said, "Lori was still somewhat coherent at the end and she responded to the boys with words of blessings. The last words she ever spoke were 'Goodbye. I'm getting on the bus now', and I remember that we read C.S. Lewis's book *The Great Divorce* together out loud." *The Great Divorce* is the story of a bus ride from purgatory to heaven to see if the people in purgatory could stand being in eternity with God. Well, Lori would only ride the bus one way, "So I said to her" Peter writes, "Honey, all your boys are here and we've said all we need to say. If you want to get on the bus now and go home, you can go to the arms of Jesus and we'll be okay. She took me at my word and she left us a little later."

Two different services can have very different feelings. I can't read that without choking up. I know Lori, I miss her, and I'm sorry for Peter. He's a guy, he's clueless, but there is an anchor of hope that goes right to the bottom that will never let go. He is sure that Lori is on the bus, the bus going home. Now, I don't know where you are on this All Saints Day weekend. Most of us are somewhere in the normal seas. Remember that anchor illustration? Most of us are in normal water; it bounces up and down, it's never calm, but you're between the storms, and for you the question is: are you forging an anchor of hope or are you just getting religious? Are you finding companions that will comfort you

as you comfort them? Some of us are in the storms. Some of you just barely got here today—you're tossing and turning—you barely got here today. Can we do more than just throw you a rope? That doesn't help. A rope? Can we put your hand on the anchor of Jesus? Jesus does not always stop the storm, but He always shows up when we feel like we're sinking. Is that you today? Some of you are watching somebody else flounder in the waves and you don't know what to do. I have to tell you, I think it's harder to watch it happen than to have it happen to you. This All Saints Day, I want to encourage you to be one of those people who just holds on to hope and prays with thanksgiving for that person, and when appropriate, with that person. Pray for them with thanks for faith that grows, and love that increases, and the perseverance to hang on. Some of you, some of us, are in settings when you leave here where faith is not shared. It's not assumed, and you need to be reminded that we are all in this together trying our very best. You need to not be a living lecture hall. You need to be a person who has hope.

The apostle Peter says, "Always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within you." In other words, just be ready to tell your story of how God gives you hope, but do so gently and with respect and don't do it at the funeral. Hug people at funerals and sit with them.

All Saints Day brings the images that will show up on the screens of those that have died this past year, the people that have gone before. The writer of the Hebrews says, "They are part of the great cloud of witnesses cheering us on from the stands as we finish the race." That was a great illustration for me this week. "Cheering from the stands!" It reminded me . . . you know what 1908 Minneapolis looked like? It looked like this. It was about the first year that Harry Caray became a radio announcer. All of my life—I grew up twelve miles from Wrigley Field—all of my life I heard, "Holy Cow! Cubs win! Cubs win! Cubs win!" I didn't hear that often. "Cubs win! Cubs win!" I thought of him sitting in the bleachers cheering on the Cubs and I thought of him this week and I thought Harry would say, "The waiting is over. The tears are all wiped away. The curse is broken!" Perfect for the Cubs. Even better for where Harry sits right now, because in the grand stands in heaven, he is cheering a different echo and he is saying, "He will swallow up death forever and God will wipe away every tear. He will take away all reproach and on that day we will say, 'Behold! This is our God!' We've waited for Him and He has saved us. This is our God. We have waited for Him. Let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

We'd like to invite you to share Communion with us, but before that, we'd like to take about four minutes and just have you look at the faces of the folks who have joined that great cloud of witnesses this last year. As you look at their faces, you might pray for the folks who are left behind. You might ask God for hope that gives comfort.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.