

With Thanksgiving for the Life of  
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4June1935+31Dec2016  
Eccl3:1-13; Col3:1-4; Lk6:20-23; Ps23

While celebrating John's life, I've also been lamenting—partly since I met him but more in the past two weeks that I didn't really get to know him.

I've been his pastor for nearly the past year, but our visits had varying amounts of connection, though he was always congenial and direct, graceful and genuine. Sometimes my stop would be as brief as a couple sentences, when he'd answer my question about a visit with, "Yes, why don't you come back another time." Other times we chatted more, still with his answers nearly as brief, a short few word replies to my inquiries. It wasn't easy to draw him out or learn about his life.

Making it even more difficult, once when he was most talkative, I later learned from Jean and Fred that the dementia had interfered and John wasn't actually remembering the stories and details as they'd actually happened. Still, perhaps the main point of that visit and the thing that I don't have any reason to doubt was his statement that he had to thank God for all of his blessings. Even as he wasn't feeling up to getting out of bed, and even as dementia was robbing him of his life, he spoke of offering thanks.

That is why we're here today, to be able to say thank you to God in honest and enormous ways, sometimes in spite of everything else. Today, we say thank you for the gift of life, for sharing it with John through the years. We say thank you for him, even though he could be difficult to know, and even in spite of sadness at his death. We give thanks because the promise of life from God overcomes all obstacles, even in this moment of sorrow and loss and finality.

Again, to back up a bit, I wish I'd gotten to know more of John. There was a sparkle in his eyes as he talked about his fundraising work and its many relationships and what that work meant for him. That delight fits with our first reading from Ecclesiastes, which concluded "that there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy [yourself] as long as [you] live; [and] moreover, it is God's gift that all should take pleasure in their toil." John discovered that pleasure in his toil, from what I've heard and learned. And I'm also told that he did pretty well at Ecclesiastes' vision of being happy and enjoying himself, including old days of tennis and the move up to the U.P. and walks around town here and Eva's reflections of dining in Chicago with her father and toasting a great nephew's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and his quick humor.

Still, along with that Bible reading, we realize it wasn't all those good times and happy memories. As much as we'd wish for those things to continue, the best Ecclesiastes can tell us is that we can't figure out why God put our times together how they are. There are times to be happy and times to mourn. A time for embracing, but also when that doesn't happen. A time to be born and a time to die. We may wish otherwise. We may not have the faintest clue of why God has done it this way. But we easily observe that this is how life goes.

We heard this same reading from Ecclesiastes as one of our Bible readings in worship on New Year's Day this year, in a service inviting us to look back at the past year and forward into the next and to discover God's blessing amid all of it. In general, there may be plenty of discontent about 2016 and trepidation for 2017. More specifically, that was also the morning when I announced with our prayers that John had died the day before, on December 31<sup>st</sup>.

Perhaps that gave us reason to look into 2017 as a relief from John's suffering, for not having to struggle any more with the diminishment of life from what it should have been. But we also have to admit we're looking into this new year without John, and that makes something obviously not right.

That sense of wrong Ecclesiastes was content—or at least resigned—to leave to the uncertainty of God. But that isn't always the faithful answer. Our faith, which discovers God most closely and importantly revealed for us in death on a cross, has a tendency to look in the obscurest places for blessing. One example is that core verse we read from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: we don't only look for God's presence and blessing amid full tables with overflowing cups or along still waters, verdant pastures, and right pathways, but the most vital verse and dearest for us in that Psalm declares the shepherd accompanies us through the darkest valleys when we're overcome by the shadow of death. That assurance is far from Ecclesiastes' sense of enjoying life, but is the heart of trust and hope in this faith we share.

The reading from Colossians also shares an unexpected assurance that seems appropriate for John. Describing John's personality, I'd use terms like introverted or reserved or a man of few words, keeping to himself. Colossians labels it that his life was hidden. There were things we didn't know or maybe couldn't understand about him, about his choices or his illness. Well, this reading says that even what we think we know about each other or about ourselves isn't the full reality. In fact, these details we claim for our identity—our families, our work lives, our shortcomings, the history we may have forgotten, our favorite sports teams—these are as good as dead amid the fullness we have of life in Christ, though that remains unseen and unknown. Who John was and who we are is

hidden in Christ, and will only be fully known through that love and the glory of resurrected life. That's an astounding word of promise.

One last example today is in the words of Jesus typically known as the Beatitudes. These are words of hidden blessing, of unexpected and surprising reversals that God's grace always brings to us. With the sense of those words from Jesus, we could continue to expand our faithful vision of this unseen reality with Beatitudes especially for John today:

Blessed are those with memory loss, for they will be remembered.

Blessed are the hard to know, because in them we nevertheless know God.

Blessed are the introverted, for in them we will find humor.

Blessed are the reserved, for from them we appreciate honesty of compliments.

Blessed are the strong in body, for in them we witness gentleness of spirit.

Blessed are the hard-working, for they will be given rest and leisure.

Blessed are we who weep, for we will sing Alleluias.

Blessed are you in death, for then you have the assurance of eternal life in Christ Jesus. Amen