

June 10, 2012

Second Sunday after Pentecost

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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My family lives near Oakland cemetery. Since I'm a native to the area, I know a lot about the place, about the famous locals buried there, about the various segregated areas and their histories, about the monuments and their symbolism. I also know that it used to be a very popular place for families to come have picnics, to bring baskets and blankets and toys and spend the day. My children, much like the picnicking families of old, think it is a great place to ride scooters and bikes. The sidewalks are paved and wide, the hills roll gently and there is a lot to look at.

When I go for runs through the cemetery, I turn off my music and pay attention to the graves and monuments that I pass. Quick math in my head tells me the ages of the people that rest there, and I often connect those ages with people I know and love today. That large angel covers a man my father's age, there are many civil war soldiers younger than my cousins.

Like many parents I know, the tiny graves are the hardest to bear because they are so outside of what I wish were the "natural" order: we are born, we live long and meaningful lives, we die surrounded by great-grandchildren that adore us. Despite my own theology of death as a part of our journey with God, I still get twisted and torn when I am confronted, either personally or professionally, with a parent burying her child.

In one part of the cemetery, there is a line of five little graves with one larger one at the end, from the 1920's. They are five little children, born two to three years apart, none living long enough to meet his or her siblings. The last one is their mother, who died a few days after her youngest child. This line of graves is so poignant to me, speaking to first the frailty of the human body, which so often-- even in this world of advanced medical science-- cannot survive the trauma and mystery of human existence.

But more importantly it speaks to me of the strength of human hope. Because that mother was so determined to raise a child that even the repeated devastating loss could not kill the hope that the next one might be healthy and strong. She did not, as St. Paul suggested, lose heart.

Paul's writings are all over the theological map. Believers of all stripes use Paul's writings to support theological understandings, ways of reading the Gospel, of interpreting God. Because of this, Paul can seem difficult to a lot of us. I include myself in that category. Paul tells us things we don't want to hear; like that we're supposed to deny our earthly selves, that life on earth is painful.

Paul's messages are hard to hear, hard to stomach in light of our fear of aging and death. We don't need to be reminded of the fragility of the human body, do we? We're living it. We're surrounded by it. Most of us are reminded daily in little ways about the wasting of our outer nature, as Paul names it. We are sagging and wrinkling, graying and creaking. And that's those of us in good health. We are all marked, too, by deaths of those we love. We know intimately what it is like to lose someone from this mortal coil.

But here's Paul, pushing us again and again into remembering that we are indeed mortal, that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

But, as usual, there's something else here, something more than just Paul's depressing litany of the frailty of humanity. What is truly remarkable in this morning's Gospel is not that the "outer nature" is wasting away. Our frailty does not make news. What is truly amazing is that Paul can say in the midst of hardship that there is hope.

For Paul, this hope is worth allowing ourselves to live into the hardship, to live into the aging, the pain, to be confronted with our own mortality, in order to witness and proclaim the good news of God's acts of redemption. God will rectify our frailness. And our faith in that is what carries us on into another day. God promises redemption. And the hope of that carries us into another year.

Back to that tragic line of impossibly tiny graves at Oakland Cemetery. That mother lived out in a way no parent should have to, this dichotomy that Paul explains in 2 Corinthians. She knew intimately about the wasting of outer nature. She watched her babies, five of them, succumb to it. And if we just stop there with Paul and with that poor mother, we may as well sink into the mire of the tragedy.

But Paul doesn't stop there. And that mother didn't stop there. And we don't stop there. Because even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. Paul said it. We all live it.

In my world, I add to the image of that line of little graves the image of my very strong, very healthy 5-year-old son, with his skinny arms and legs brown from the sun flying through Oakland Cemetery on his bike. He is the image of vitality. He embodies life and possibility. His outer nature shows no signs of wasting.

What does that she think of my beautiful son, who has outlived-- in more ways than one-- every one of her five precious children? What does she think of me as I chase him on my bike, having never worried about more than a nosebleed in my children?

I like to think that she, together now with the babies she loved till the end, is hopeful still, that my son shows her that babies can indeed grow like little weeds, that mothers can worry about nothing but nosebleeds.

We are, as humans, fragile. We break and bleed. We hurt and we grieve and we die and we lose. There is no promise in the Gospels that we will be anything other than fragile in our time on earth, in our outer nature.

But we are, as children of God, a hope-filled people. As Paul's difficult teachings direct us to again and again, we possess a strength that is sometimes individual but more often communal. This is a deep well of strength that does not deny our physical frailty but instead confronts it and does not let it overcome us. Together, with God and one another, we possess this inner nature, day by day renewed, that will bring us into the eternal glory beyond measure. Into that place where, as our burial liturgy tells us, there is no pain nor grief but life eternal.