

“Easter in July”

Sermon of the Rev. Dan Hatch, Interim Senior Minister
Nu’uanu Congregational Church, August 24, 2008
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (NRSV)

Text: *“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”* (1 Corinthians 15: 55)

Today marks the 22 anniversary of my ordination at First United Protestant Church in Hilo. Nu’uanu Congregational Church has been unique in my experience in that I have conducted more memorials and funerals in the five months that I have been your half-time interim minister than I have at any other comparable block of time in my twenty-two years of ministry. Not all of them have been members of Nu’uanu, but coupled with the death of my own wife on July 28th, I have had to do a lot of reflection about the nature of death.

Fortunately most of the services I have conducted have been for truly wonderful people who lived and manifest their faith in relational ways that touched many lives. Alice Sueoka, whose funeral I presided at on Monday, was one such person. She was and baptized here in 1960, rarely attended, but lived what most would consider a very Christ-like life in the way she shared her love. Over 300 people attended her service at Hosoi’s. As I was riding home I found myself thinking that I should have cast aside what I had prepared and just shared some of what I have learned since July 28 on my own journey since Sue died.

So today I decided to part from the lectionary and share some of my “truth”. I do so not as Truth, with a capital “T”, The Truth, but as an invitation to dialogue, as death is an integral part of life, yet it is a topic we usually are not comfortable talking about. I find that ironic when one considers that death and resurrection lay at the core of Christian faith.

What has prompted a lot of my reflection, is my surprise to find myself spontaneously singing, humming or whistling songs and hymns of joy since Sue’s death! That was certainly not how I expected to feel after Sue died. It is certainly not how I felt after the deaths of my mother, my father, or my in-laws. I slowly came to realize that what I was experiencing was a resurrection, and therefore my sermon title, Easter in July. Let me try to explain.

My journey into death as resurrection began nearly four years ago when Sue was first diagnosed with stage four metastatic breast cancer that had spread throughout all her bones. Right after her diagnosis, Sue was hospitalized for a whole month of pain-management. The wonderful staff of the Oncology unit at Kaiser, and on the oncology wing of the hospital thought Sue would leave the hospital in a hearse. I was surprised that one of my first reactions was that we would not get to celebrate our 50th anniversary. I didn’t realize that was an assumption I had made based on having celebrated the 50th anniversaries of both sets of my grandparents 54 years ago. I quickly came to my senses? Who was I to complain? After all, I had been blessed with the opportunity to share nearly 40 years with this remarkable person whom God blessed me with as my wife.

What this served to do was to remind me of one of the primary lessons from my spiritual directors over the last 23 years; the importance of living in the present. Life is given us just one heart beat at a time, a fact I was rudely reminded of this past week when I learned that Keith Moon, the stepson of my oldest cousin, just fifty years old, had been struck and killed by a SUV as he peddled home from work in Bend, Oregon. It is in the present that God always intersects with our life. If we live in the future, we are likely to miss our encounters with God in the present. The same is true of living in the past. That is why unconditional forgiveness, forgiveness that is not dependent on what another does or says, is so important, as it frees us from the past to live in the present. In fact, the best definition I have ever heard for forgiveness is, "Forgiveness is giving up all hope of a better past." Think about that for a moment: Forgiveness is giving up all hope of a better past.

To live in the present, I quickly gave up on any hope of celebrating our 50th anniversary and began focusing on the gift I was being given each day by having Sue as my wife. Thursday would have been our 43rd anniversary, but what is an anniversary compared to 365 days of each previous year? As a result of Sue's death, each day has brought e-mails and cards with condolences, but more importantly reflections on the way Sue, the one I was privileged to call my wife, had touched their lives.

Barbara, one of our fellow Fiji I Peace Corps Volunteers who served as a Secretary, who only knew us in the third and fourth years of our marriage, wrote: "*You two were together, a strong bonded unit, and I know that was clear to staff and other Volunteers. Your oneness without losing individuality was admirable.*" If that bond between us is a bond of love, and love is of God, and marriage, as I point out in a homily on the symbolism of the rings I use for weddings "is not a binding, but a free association based on trust and love," then that bond cannot be broken even by death. The truth of that discovery in itself has been a source of daily joy.

Further more, Barbara reminded me that one of the best definitions for the task of grief, and one that I have used for the past 15 years or more, is that the task of grief "is coming to grips with ones own identity with that piece missing for which you are grieving." What I realized was that for both Sue and me our identity is not based on each other, but rather on who we are as beloved children of God, who were blessed to share a large portion of our life together. In that sense, Sue's death has not changed my identity, thereby also a contributing factor to my joy.

Another contributing source of my joy stems from the fact that Sue no longer has to suffer the pains and indignities of weekly chemo treatments, and is free to live her new life with God. One of the things I have come to realize doing the funerals and memorials of so many people who spend their lives investing their love in others, is that they live on, after their death, in the lives of those they touched, and those who share their stories with others about how their lives were touched. Now that to me is heaven! If you think about it, that is how we come to know Christ Jesus, and how Jesus lives in us—it is through the stories that others tell and continue to tell. Even though Jesus has been physically dead for 2000 years, he is spiritually alive in us today.

A final piece of my joy stems from the realization that while it is not something I would have chosen, Sue, who has her new life in the spirit, has also given me the challenge of living a new life. While I was very happy with my old life, I find great comfort in knowing that Sue will always be an integral part of my new life because of the ways in which she has helped shape my life over the past 43 years. A key piece of that life will always be our children and grandchildren through whom Sue also continues to live.

With that as context, let me turn now to our text from 1 Corinthians. Paul begins by reminding us that *flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor can the perishable inherit the imperishable*. Simply put, the realm of God's love is a spiritual realm, not a material one. One friend shared with me in his note that "the person is not in the body, but that the body is in the person." I had to think about that for a little while, but at Alice's funeral, which was an open casket one, its meaning became clear. Our bodies are many. They begin as infant bodies, become the bodies of young children, then the bodies of youth, the bodies of young adults, adults and finally the bodies of the elderly, yet the person is the same person, and that person, the soul, leaves the body at death and returns to God in a spirit body.

This is what Paul means when he says, *Listen, I will tell you a mystery! "We will not all die, but we will be changed, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* Note that Paul does not qualify this by saying that his will happen only if we are Christian. It is what happens to all human beings. At the time of physical death we become spiritual beings. Paul's words are , *"When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body (I.e. the person) puts on immortality, then the saying that is written (based on Isaiah 25.8 and Hosea 13.14) will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."*

*"Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"*

Therein, my friends, lays the joy that I have been experiencing. Sue's death has not stung! Therein in lays my Easter in July and my realization that Easter is much more than a once a year celebration of an event that took place 2000 years ago, but a spiritual event that can occur over and over again, especially with every physical death.

Paul concludes that from a spiritual perspective the only death is sin. It is doing those things that separate us from the love of God and the love of one another. Paul points out that *the power of sin is law*. But that God gives us victory from such law, i.e. we are able to transcend such law through our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul then concludes with this admonishment: *"Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable (i.e. in faith), always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.* That knowledge is good news!

The work of the Lord is simply learning how to invest in right relationships, with God, with your neighbor, and with your self, by freely giving away God's abundant love, investing it in others, as Sue, Keith Moon and so many others have done, that you come to know, as I have, the power of Easter, even in July.

