

If you're here joining us in worship for the 1st time, I'll let you know that this is the 2nd of 4 sermons around a topic leading us toward an important day on the Christian Calendar - All Saints Day. All Saints Day is November 1st, but in worship we'll be observing it on Sunday, November 7. It's a day we remember and celebrate those who have passed away since All Saints Day last year - not only members and constituents of this church, but anyone you wish to remember & honor during worship. We'll have a special way for anyone in worship on November 7 to submit names of those they wish to recognize and we'll read their names out loud, ring a bell and light a candle in their honor - an important tradition, especially since we were not able to gather in person to celebrate the lives of some this past year with Covid.

Leading up to and including that day, we'll take a look at questions of faith surrounding death and resurrection from the United Methodist Perspective. The question for today in our time of worship is ....

"Is Our Time of Death Predetermined?"

Some of what I'm sharing today comes from a series of articles about death and resurrection on our denominational website - UMC.org. - which is a great resource and I encourage you to check it out sometime, especially the page - Ask the UMC - Frequently Asked Questions.

There are several scriptures that talk about a time to die and our days being numbered. In the book of Job we find these words "Our days are fixed, the number of our months with you, you set a statute and we can't exceed it." Then there's the famous verse from Ecclesiastes 3, "a time to be born a time to die," which points to the limited span of a human life. And from Psalm 139 - the well known Psalm that begins "Oh Lord, you've searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away." That same Psalm 139 - in verse 16 it says, "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In Your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed."

The authors of those books might have been struggling with the question of why bad things happen to good people or simply saying, "Life is short." Balancing the question of God's omniscience

- God all-knowingness - knowing the days of our birth, life and death - balancing that with a human being's free will is tricky. Is saying that God knows the day we'll die, the same as saying God predetermined that day? Methodists would say that we seek a balance between God's knowledge and our free will, with the need to be careful not to say that God causes death.

John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist movement which began in England around 1740, had a fundamental disagreement attributing evil to God, or assigning God responsibility for the bad things that happen to people, including death. As it also says in Lamentations, "Although God allows grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love, for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone."

The classical, more orthodox Christian view about God is that God is omnipotent - all powerful-, omniscient - all knowing -, impassable - unaffected by the world & creation -, and immutable - unchangeable. This point of view is wanting to emphasize that creatures - people - can not control the Creator, not that God is insensitive to creation. In the Bible and early Christian writings God is portrayed as compassionate, meaning that God is passionate about God's creatures - us. That God is empathetic, which means it's possible for God to be merciful, forgiving, to hear the cries of the earth and be grieved in God's Holy Spirit when we commit sin through violating God's intention for right relationship with God, with one another and the rest of creation.

So I just mentioned a classical, more orthodox view that God is omniscient and knows our future, but is also compassionate and so is affected by us and the world - God is empathetic.

But a different point of view - something called Process Theology - in my understanding - would say that God knows all possibilities, but not the final decisions of and outcomes for each individual - meaning that the day of our death is not predetermined, but that our choices bring different ends. Process Theologians would say - I think - I welcome hearing your point of view later if your understanding of Process Theology is different than this, but I think Process Theologians would say that If God knew the final decisions and outcome for each

John 11:17-26, 38-44

Rev. Susan Juergensen

individual - then it would not make sense to talk about free will, the freedom to choose God or evil or even talk about evangelism - why would sharing the gospel message of life in Jesus Christ be important if God knew and had predetermined our end?

It would be true to say in the United Methodist church, our doctrines leave some room for interpretation here. What I mean is - there are United Methodist members and clergy who are more classical, orthodox thinkers AND there are United Methodist members and clergy who are more Process Theology thinkers.

One thing that IS pretty clear - United Methodism differs from most Lutheran and Presbyterian churches in their doctrines on predetermined death in that the Methodist Church, following John Wesley, believes that every person has the freedom to choose salvation or not. That God wants ALL people to come to salvation through Jesus Christ. Whereas most Lutheran and Presbyterian churches follow Calvinist thought that God predestines SOME for salvation and others not. This, in fact, is one of the main differences between these mainline denominations.

I want to take a break now from all this theology - whew - as we consider death and resurrection leading up to All Saints Day - and take a moment to highlight now two of our "Saints" - meaning one devoted to Christ - who were members of this church and passed away since last All Saints Day. First is Georgianna Kelly - who passed away February 9.

Born in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, Georgianna's parents separated when she was three and her dad died a few years later. Her mom had to work when she was young and she didn't have much adult supervision because of that, but she didn't worry, because she could see the cafe from where they lived and townsfolk kept tabs on her. Her mom remarried when she was nine and they moved 10 times during her school years! She loved to read and learn new things. She met her husband of 58 years when she was 13 and he was 15. In high school she worked at a cafe and as a church secretary, and after graduating she worked for an insurance company maintaining computer systems. She & Don married soon after she graduated and they had four children: Michael, Diana, Dale and Willow.

In Don's 28 1/2 year career as an Air Force officer, Georgianna & he were stationed many places including Texas, South Carolina, Wisconsin, Missouri, Louisiana, Canada, Belgium, and Holland! After his Air Force career, Don worked for Hughes aircraft and they lived one year in Pakistan and three years in Germany.

She always loved globes and maps and enjoyed locating countries involved in current news stories. She was especially proud of her involvement in the "Terrific Kids" program, visiting grade schools and giving the children esteem building recognition. Very active in the United Methodist Church, she spearheaded the creation of the "Faith Journey" group here, which continues today, whose mission is to get to know members, support and love one another, and reach out to needy persons in the community. I'm told many here remember Georgianna's beaming smile and how she was a gifted encourager. This was the phrase she said so often: "I love you and I appreciate you."

And second - Beulah Hensien. Beulah was the mother of Judy Zimperich, who is currently teaching Sunday School right now in the back rooms. Beulah was 99 when she passed away December 16 - which interestingly enough - was 20 years to the day from when her younger sister passed away. Beulah had 8 brothers and sisters and she and her younger sister were the two youngest. Judy said she was an amazing care giver. She cared for her younger sister, even bringing her from Illinois here to live with them, for niece who had health issues and for her husband before his death. Family was everything to her. She loved her 9 great grandchildren and her 4 grandchildren. She would tell her family, please don't buy me presents, just being together is the best present of all. She lived alone and drove until she was 95 when she moved into Estancia Del Sol and was extremely healthy the whole time. Even Covid didn't affect her. Her body just finally gave out and she died a quiet death.

We remember and celebrate the lives of Georgianna Kelly and Beulah Hensien.

I'll say one more thing about the question "Is Our Time of Death Predetermined"? United Methodism doesn't believe God causes harm to people or causes

death. Rather than harm and death is part of this fallen, broken and sinful world. Even as we long for the day when death will be no more, we recognize God's unconditional love and presence with us during times of suffering and even death. Is our time of death predetermined? I've offered some thoughts about this and the United Methodist perspective - what do you think?