

Reflection on Psalm 116:15

All Saints Sunday, November 3, 2019

Rev. Dr. Tim Phillips



In this season of Halloween, and the Day of the Dead, and All Saints, I find myself haunted by the anthem today.

*Back in the years with all together,
Around the place we'd romp and play.
So lonely now and oft' times wonder,
Oh will they come back home some day.*

This is music that comes to us from the African-American experience. And you can imagine parents living in slavery watching their children being taken away from them and sold off to another master.

Imagine Native parents whose children were taken away to government schools in order to strip them of their tribal identity in the name of "civilization."

You don't have to imagine today the parents of children at the border. According to USA Today, "more than 900 children have been taken from their parents after a 2018 court ordered them to stop." As many as five children a day are separated from their parents.

It doesn't take a lot to imagine:

*I'm lonely for my precious children,
They live so far away.
Oh may they hear my calling ... and come back home some day ...
I lived my life, my love I gave them,
To guide them through this world of strife,
I hope and pray we'll live together,
In that great glad here after life.*

"I'm lonely for my precious children," speaks of all kinds of loss.

I don't think I was ever at a funeral where my dad didn't quote Psalm 116.15: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." (KJV)

That left me with a lot of questions. How could any separation much less the separation of death ever be "precious?"

What I knew of death was that it was dismissed as simply a step into heaven. I saw people being shamed for grieving. How dare they not trust that God had simply whisked their loved ones away to a better place? There should be no tears. There should only be rejoicing for this precious experience of landing in the arms of God.

On the other hand, death could be the most powerful expression of faith ever. We were told stories of the great martyrs who went through gruesome deaths in triumph with their faith. It was almost like we should be longing for the opportunity to die such a heroic death.

So which was it? Death is an inconsequential blip on the way to heaven or an unsurpassed demonstration of heroic faithfulness?

And what kind of God would find any of this “precious?”

Now don’t get me wrong. Some of you have been with loved ones in that most intimate time of transition from this life. Those moments can be precious. The family of Barbara Bell told me how thankful they were to be with Barbara when she died. Those are moments they will treasure.

But the loss itself is not “precious.”

Like a lot of my upbringing, there were snippets of the Bible that we were taught as a guide for our lives. Unfortunately, having been torn from their context, these verses became more platitudes than parables of anything helpful.

So here’s the context of Psalm 116.

It begins with:

*¹ I love the LORD, because the Lord has heard
my voice and my supplications.*

I don’t know if any of you are Whitney Houston fans but this is where Richard Smallwood’s “I Love the Lord” comes from. She sings it in her Christmas movie with Denzell Washington: *The Preacher’s Wife*. Believe it or not, that song is actually in our hymnal, #511. “I love the Lord, who heard my cry ...”

So this psalm begins not with a glorification of death but with gratitude for life.

*The snares of death encompassed me, the psalmist says,
The pangs of Sheol (that place where refuse goes – the garbage dump)
The pangs of Sheol laid hold of me;
I suffered distress and anguish,
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
‘O Lord, I pray, save my life!’*

The context of “precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints,” isn’t some pious death-wish. It isn’t resignation to the power of death. It isn’t about how precious death is because it is the inconsequential step into heaven or the shining example of martyrdom. It is about gratitude for the gift of life.

The psalm goes on:

*You have delivered my soul from death,
My eyes from tears,
My feet from stumbling.
I walk before the Lord
In the land of the living.*

This a song of gratitude for the gift of life.

I am likely to say at a memorial service that grief is an expression of gratitude. Or as Patrick says, “You don’t hurt like this if you didn’t love like that.”

We grieve the things and the people we are most grateful for.

I am, however, fully aware that we can find ourselves grieving that which we have never had: the parents who could not be what we needed them to be; the relationship that had so much promise and failed us; the hope that never became a reality. And so we grieve what we have not had.

But can anyone be all the things we need? Can any hope ever fully compensate for all the broken promises of our lives? Is there any relationship that does not leave us with some sense of what we are missing?

Sometimes I think we can be so grief-stricken about what we don't have that we miss the gratitude for what we do.

The psalmist surely knows that being delivered from the "snares of death" doesn't mean that she will never die. But she knows that, when death does come, she can be grateful that whatever is truly precious in her life will remain.

This is a "psalm of thanksgiving" that has been passed down to us from ancient times. It is one of the "Hallel psalms" recited for generations at the feasts of Passover and Pentecost or Shavuot, and the feasts of Tabernacles and Hanukkah, giving thanks for deliverance.

And here is the other thing about Psalm 116. It's about gratitude and gathering.

*I will pay my vows to God, it says,
In the presence of all God's people.*

Believe me, I know the loss of a beloved one can feel isolating. As the anthem says, "I'm lonesome for my precious children."

But in the presence of one another, we discover that we are not alone. In the deepest experience of loneliness, you can discover that you are not alone even in your loneliness. Others are there with you. Others have gone before you in that experience. There are people here this morning who know what that feels like.

Sometimes I think we are too quick to assume that no one struggles like we do. No one has felt our pain. No one experiences the hurt that haunts us or the emptiness that never seems to be filled.

Ask the parents whose children were taken from them in slavery.
Ask the Native parents who lost generations to white European culture.
Ask the parents this morning at the southern border, who cry out:
*I gave my all for my dear children,
Their problems still with love I share,
I'd brave life's storm, defy the tempest
To bring them home from anywhere.*

Perhaps you can hear the ache of that loss and longing in your own heart this morning.

And so we gather to remember that we are not alone. And to assure others that they are not alone.

And we gather in gratitude for those who have walked with us and stood by us and still guide us along the way – those in the land of the living and those who have found their way home to that “great glad here after life.”

Let’s not squander the gift of life in self-imposed isolation.

Let’s not trash the gifts of life with ingratitude.

Let’s listen together for that voice that calls us to our truest home, where goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our life and we live in God’s house forever.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

“More than 900 children were split from parents at the border since 2018 court order,” www.usatoday.com, 11/2/2019. Psalm 116 by Kathryn L. Roberts in *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp.299-302.