

Tuesday night is probably going to be a goosebump kind of night, right? Do you know where your kids or grandkids will be and what they will be doing? If you are like most parents, when your kids were growing up you most likely wanted them to experience the traditional excitement of patrolling through neighborhoods "trick-or-treating" for Halloween goodies. If you still have little ones, you probably even plan to go with them to protect them and to watch out for the real Halloween spooks - those who put razors in apples and poison in candy. The one place you probably won't take your kids Tuesday night, or visit yourself, however, is a graveyard.

In the past, if you wanted to visit a graveyard, you wouldn't go to one of today's country cemeteries, or in town memorial parks. Instead, you'd go to church! The graveyards of the past were planted around the church, creating a community of the "quick and the dead" - quick inside, dead outside. For believers it was important to be buried within the borders of sanctified ground from which rose both the church building - the center of worship life for the living Saints - and the communal cemetery - the final resting place for all past generations of saints who had lived and died as believers.

It's been at least three or four generations now that most of us have found nothing very comforting, or sanctified, in a graveyard. Graveyards are no longer seen by all as holy ground. They aren't even perceived as wholesome ground. Perhaps we've been imprinted by too many cheap, creepy, mist-in-the-graveyard horror movies to see cemeteries as anything but haunted and horrible. By moving our burial grounds away from our worship centers, we have fractured the fellowship of the faithful. And we forget that the majority of the church is underground.

Why do we so quickly whisk the dead away to fenced-in (or is it fenced-off) "green ghettos"? Is it a way to safely ignore the reality of death? Is it our plot to keep those creepy dead folks out of our line of sight or, most especially, underfoot?

The old church graveyard, on the other hand, was a consistently "in your face" place. In death, as in life, those church graveyards offered a real "down and dirty" answer to the question of one's ultimate loyalty, one's final response to the question, "To whom do you belong?" The common ground of the burial grounds overruled allegiances to families, tribes, clubs or cliques. To whom do you belong? You belong to God!!

You don't belong to your parents. You don't belong to your community. You don't belong to yourself. You belong to God! In fact, the day after October 31 – Halloween horror is transformed into the sanctity of the saints on a day which is called, All Saints' Day. It's a sort of Christian Hall of Fame day when we remember the early Christians who were persecuted and killed, not because of supposed criminal conduct, but because they claimed "the name itself." Bearing the very name of "Christian" was enough to earn one a death sentence. The issue was not wrongdoing. It was name-bearing.

You might say that the Christians of Thessalonica were some of these early Hall of Famers. Today's second lesson recalls how early church communities were forced to face the persistent possibility that they might suddenly find themselves part of Rome's permanent Christian "witness relocation" program. In periodic fits of pluralistic religious cleansing, various emperors ordered (or simply "allowed") cruel and violent purges of philosophically annoying religious sects, especially one particularly peculiar sect called "Christians."

One didn't even need to be a very "good" Christian to raise Rome's ire. Despite this, the Thessalonian Christians faced the danger and uncertainty of bearing the name of Christ with grace, courage and good spirit. Paul is delighted to

be able to "boast" about the witness of these saints. Although they faced "persecutions" and "afflictions," the Thessalonians had become mirrors of Christ's own glory by growing in faith, increasing in love, and enduring with steadfastness.

So why is it that, although burying martyred believers in Christian graveyards was a real growth industry in the first century, there were always new saints ready to risk everything for the sake of their faith? Pastor Steve Wilson of Meadow Grove Baptist Church in Brandon, Mississippi, shocks our sterile sensibilities by insisting that "God's power works best in a graveyard." He invites us to look at the Lazarus story: "It is never hopeless with God. God's power works best in a graveyard. What is happening in your life? Are you ready to give up? Do you think it is too late for even God to help? Are your plans dead? Are your dreams dead? Is your hope dead? God's power works best in a graveyard."

Or look at Martin Luther's story! At one point in his flight from both civic and ecclesiastical authorities, Luther was forced to take refuge among the bats and owls of a cold, dark and dank Wartburg castle. Lonely and depressed, he wrote, "I had rather burn on live coals than rot here." Smoke was rising from the charcoal burners outside his room. But as he watched, a wind came up and blew the smoke away. In that moment his doubt dissipated and his faith was restored.

Or look at the Jesus story! Wilson writes, "I wonder if in your pain, you have lost sight of Jesus. Can you not see that he is at work all around you? Do you not know you are in his presence? Listen, you can hear him calling your name! He wants to resurrect your hope! He wants to give you life! When life looks the worst, God is at his best. God's power works best in a graveyard."

Which begs the question, so where is your graveyard? Where in your life are you most bereft of hope? Where do you feel most helpless? Where are you most at your wits' end? It is there, precisely there, that God can work best. Where life is worst, God is best. God does his best work in a graveyard.

In Lamentations 3:18, Jeremiah complains, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the LORD." But a couple verses later, he affirms that, although his "soul ... is bowed down," he has not forgotten, nor has he lost all hope: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'"

Hymn writer Thomas Chisholm based the words to "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" on this text. But at one point Chisholm makes an error in his representation of the passage. Remember the chorus? Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning, new mercies I see ...

Oops! Did the hymn writer get it wrong? The Bible clearly states that Jeremiah did not see. He didn't see a thing! Jeremiah had no visible evidence of God's mercies at all. Morning by morning brought horror, pain and dread, but not "new mercies." Jeremiah could not say, "I trust you because I understand it all - because I've got it all figured out." He could only say, "I trust you because you are God and you cannot lie!"

No, the hymn writer didn't get it wrong. God was working in Jeremiah's graveyard, enabling him to "see" what no one else could see. He could only say as author CS Lewis writes, "We cannot understand! The best is perhaps what we understand least." God was working in the Thessalonians' graveyard, giving them the courage to bear the name of Jesus. God was working in the graveyard of the early Church as they bore witness to the faith. God was working in Luther's graveyard, and God is still working in our graveyards today.

Similarly, as we prepare to re-affirm our Baptisms this morning, I would like us all to remember that whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, whatever hardships or troubles life throws at us, God will always be there! Although we may not always see him walking beside us, or feel him carrying us when we are

overwhelmed, or distraught, by whatever tragedy comes our way, he is always there with us! He can be found especially in the lives of God's living Saints, our Christian brothers and sisters, our friends and family members who gather with us for worship each week to show our gratitude for all that God has done for us and to offer one another support and encouragement!

Finally, as I like to mention over and over again, our faith is all about love, about God's love for us, and our love for him and each other! We are called to live it, and to walk the walk of love every day, to the best of our ability, and with all our intention. And if we ever find ourselves in a figurative, or literal graveyard, we need only remember that our faith is strengthened, enhanced and protected when we, like Paul, pray to God, asking — O God, make us worthy of your call and will, enabling us to fulfill by your power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in us, and us in him, according to your grace, dear God of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**