

The Box on the Closet Shelf

All Saints Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

10:45 a.m. Sunday, November 7, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

My mom said to me, "We have a job to do." I was visiting my parents this summer, and my mother told me she'd been waiting for this visit so she and I could do a particular task. Then she went into her bedroom, climbed on a stool, reached up to the shelf in the closet, and brought down a good-sized cardboard box.

She placed it on the living room floor, we sat down together, and she opened the box. It contained every sympathy card my parents received 31 years ago after my brother died in a car accident. There was the guest registry listing the names of those who visited the funeral home and church. There were all the little cards that had been attached to flower arrangements, and those larger cards that acknowledged memorial gifts in my brother's name. There was a copy of the funeral bulletin, and the sermon preached by our pastor.

We proceeded, she and I, to look through every item in the box. Mom said her primary objective was to decide what to save after 31 years, and what to throw away. Well, I actually think that was the secondary objective. I think Mom's primary objective was to read through each item one more time.

Now, I suppose you could call it a "trip down memory lane." But that trivial phrase would not do justice to the afternoon experience. Nor would it be accurate. In the process of reading through the cards and letters, noting the names of those who came to the funeral home, and reflecting on Pastor Decker's sermon, Mom and I did indeed think back to how Christ's compassion flowed through so many people during that time, how gentle, kind, concerned, and helpful they were. But what also became clear was that the consoling experience of May 1979 was being experienced again by us in July 2010.

How could that be? Many cards were signed with the names of people who had long since entered the Church Triumphant, as we say—they had died sometime in the intervening 31 years. Take Lester and Marie Simon, for instance, who always sat in the pew in front of us. Because we always sat in **our** pew. (None of you are like that here, are you?) Mrs. Simon had a green winter coat with a real fur collar—not fancy, mind you, but warm, soft and substantial. I always wanted to reach out in front of me and touch that fur collar. Well, the Simons were so loving in their sympathy card to us, and I know they kept us in their prayers for a long time. But they were dead **now**.

So how could it be that re-reading a 31-year-old card from someone long since dead would be consoling **now**? But I tell you, it **was**.

We read on through the afternoon, passing cards and letters back and forth, saying, "Look what Art and Doris Toronski wrote." And, "You need to read this one from the Redmounts."

There was the brief letter from Danny's English teacher. Miss Dolores Dean was always so proper and precise in grammar, but when it came to telling us how highly she thought of Danny, and how she mourned with us in our loss, it wasn't grammatical structure that stood out in the letter, it was the pure poetry of her words.

And then, reading Pastor Decker's sermon—well, frankly, I couldn't recall a bit of it from the day of the funeral, and, in fact, had never seen a copy. So I read it hungrily now. Pastor Decker spoke the good news of Jesus Christ to us in the midst of a senseless tragedy none of us, not even the pastor himself, as he fully admitted, could understand. He spoke simply, but clearly, of the love God has for his people, including Danny. He spoke about the gifts of the Holy Spirit given at his baptism that were at work in my brother in his 23 years of life. And Pastor Decker spoke with conviction about the new resurrected life promised to Danny through our Risen Lord.

So often I tell folks that most of the time you really can't use an old sermon again. Preaching is very much "in the moment" as I like to say, and I find an old sermon usually doesn't speak anew to us. Yet I tell you now that Pastor Decker's words were as fresh and consoling, as powerful and faith-sustaining on July 5, 2010, as they were on May 5, 1979, when I first heard them.

The afternoon hours were spent, and finally Mom decided what items to save—particular cards and letters, the guest registry, the bulletin and sermon. A smaller cardboard box would suffice, and its contents were stored in her bedroom on that closet shelf. We shed tears that afternoon, definitely, but mostly our hearts were filled with gratitude that God had comforted us through so many people—**and now twice over!** Thus we were once more convinced that the Holy Spirit is still at work in Christ's Church: Always comforting. Always strengthening. Always granting faith. Always giving hope. Always pointing to God's future.

The contents of the box signified one congregation's and one community's desire to participate in God's activity in this broken world. Every card and every letter, the worship bulletin and sermon, stood in open defiance against the forces of death and decay. The contents of the box proclaimed loud and clear the God who, in Christ, does a new thing and offers life.

When you and I in this congregation comfort those who mourn, or feed the hungry, or stand up for the powerless, or share with the poor...when we listen to the lonely, or welcome the stranger, or offer forgiveness, or strive for peace ...when we light candles on All Saints Sunday for the people from this congregation who died this past year and name them by name and commend them in prayer to God—then **we, too**, stand in open defiance against the forces of death and decay. And what shines through you and me is the very light and life of Christ.

When Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus in today's lesson, he stated that the Holy Spirit "is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people..." What Paul was saying to the Ephesians was that the Holy Spirit they experienced and witnessed in their fellowship was actually a glimpse of the coming kingdom of God, the kingdom in which they were promised a place. So what's that got to do with our fellowship here? When that same Holy Spirit is at work in our faith community—bringing

comfort, strengthening faith, encouraging us in our daily serving—well, that’s a glimpse of the glory that is to come in all its fullness in the future God has planned for us. And that means that what you and I experience in this fellowship is just a little bit of heaven here on earth. **AMEN.**