

# "The Last Enemy"

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

November 20, 2011

The Last Sunday in the Church Year

Wars used to be much easier to understand. Enemies used to be clearly seen and understood. During the time of the Revolutionary War in this country, armies used to face each other in a field and start firing. Soldiers could clearly see their enemies. The British made it even easier by wearing bright red uniforms.

It was also easy to know when a war was over and the enemy was defeated. The Treaty of Paris was signed on a specific date (September 3, 1783) at a specific place (guess where). It clearly stated that the American colonies were the victors, Great Britain was the loser, and that the war was over.

War has changed. Now we fight a war on terrorism. The enemy is not clearly seen or understood. Our enemies hide in the shadows, appear to hurt us (like 9/11), and then fade back into the shadows.

It is difficult to know when that war on terrorism will ever be over and if our enemy will finally be defeated. We have been fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for over ten years now. We got rid of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. But do you feel that we've won the war? Do you feel that the enemy has truly been defeated? There has been no declaration that hostilities have ceased no peace treaty.

Therefore, we live in fear. The enemy can strike at any moment. We can put safeguards into place, but we can never truly be safe. And you get the feeling, at least in this war, that the enemy will never be defeated and no lasting peace will be declared.

We face an enemy much worse than even terrorists: death. Death is very clever. It has duped us into believing that, not only is it not an enemy, but it is actually a good thing – a natural part of life and sometimes even a friend. In ancient times, Stoic philosophers welcomed death as the

soul's release from the prison of the body. Today, proponents of euthanasia and assisted suicide say the same thing: death is a friend to be embraced when things become unbearable for us.

Nothing could be more wrong. Death is NOT natural. It was never a part of God's good creation. God created people to live forever in peace and harmony with Him. He threatened death only as a punishment to Adam and Eve if they disobeyed Him. They did and they died. Now, the Bible says, the wages for any sin is death. Our text for today from 1 Corinthians says "in Adam all die." By that, it means that all people who are "in Adam", that is, are connected to him by birth will die. That means you. That means me. That means all of humanity.

Death is not the release of the soul from the prison of the body. It is not a "friend" that frees us from our suffering now and takes us to a better place as advocates of euthanasia and assisted suicide would have you believe. Death is the separation of us from God. Death means greater suffering by taking us to a far worse place, namely, the fire of hell. Death is an enemy.

Death is worse than any terrorist. Most of the time, we don't see death. But, it pops in and out of our lives, suddenly and unexpectedly. Without warning, death will step out of the shadows to snatch a friend, a loved one, or even or crowds of people. Even if we know a person is dying, we are still shocked when death comes. Then, as quickly as death comes, it goes back into hiding.

We try to ignore death by living as if it will never come for us. We try to hide from death by pretending it doesn't exist. We may say a person has passed, passed on, or (as one hospital once reported to me about a church member) expired. We don't even want to speak death's name.

There is no defeating of death. There are no peace treaties to be signed with death, ending the hostilities. We can try to protect ourselves from death, postpone death from coming, or even prepare ourselves for death, but we cannot get rid of death. If living in fear of terrorists is bad, living in fear of death is even worse. Terrorists cannot defeat everyone, but death will eventually claim every one of us.

In about a month, we will celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Many people, even some Christians, think this is a cute story. God takes on human flesh and is born as a baby in the stall at Bethlehem. It's nothing of the kind. It is the arming of the Son of God to go to war against our enemy, death. The Book of Hebrews says, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (Heb. 2:14-15)

Jesus took care of the cause of death by offering His perfect life as the sacrifice for sin. His death breaks the power of the devil over us by forgiving the sin which placed us under his power in the first place. Our sin is forgiven. As St. John wrote in his first epistle, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2)

Jesus also took care of the curse of death by rising from the dead to life again. His resurrection is, as Paul says in the text, "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." In other words, Jesus' resurrection is the first one to rise from the dead, but he is not the last. He is the first of many who will follow Him through the grave to life again. Paul writes, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." All who are connected to Adam by virtue of their physical birth will die as a result. In the same way, all who are connected to Christ by virtue of their spiritual rebirth will be made alive.

You have been baptized into Christ Jesus. That means you are connected to His death so that His death on the cross is the wages for your sin. His sacrifice for sin is the sacrifice for your sin. But, even more important, you are connected to His resurrection from the dead. His resurrection from the dead becomes your resurrection from the dead. Just as Jesus rose from the dead to life, you, too, will rise from death to life again.

There is one drawback in this scenario and that is death is still in the picture. The enemy is still hanging around. As Christians, we may still try to ignore that by saying at the funeral of one who

has died in the faith, “We shouldn’t be sad; we should only rejoice. This is a victory celebration.” Then we feel guilty for feeling grief and pain, as if we are somehow lacking faith by feeling those emotions

There is no reason to feel guilty for feeling grief or pretending that everything should be happy at a Christian funeral. Death is a reality and death is still an enemy. It has been defeated, but not yet done away with. “As long as people continue to die as the wages of their sin, inherited from Adam, who rebelled against the Creator, God’s good and gracious will for his creation is not yet brought to completion.” (Lockwood, p.571)

But it will be. On this Last Sunday in the Church Year when we think of the last day, many people have feelings of fear or nervousness. There is no reason for that. The last day will be a day of great triumph. The Babe of Bethlehem returns as the King of the Universe. He comes to destroy “every rule and every authority and power” – both spiritual and physical. He comes to put every all of His enemies under his feet – Satan, those angels who have followed Satan, and those humans who have followed Satan and inflicted great evil in this world. What joy there is in that for us who put our faith in Jesus Christ and followed Him!

But there’s more. Paul writes, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Hear that clearly! The enemy which has hurt us and terrified us will be done away with. The enemy which seemed so powerful will be destroyed. The enemy which we thought would never lose will not win. Christ won on the cross! Christ won at the empty tomb! Christ will win when He comes again! All those who are in Christ win, too. We win over sin. We win over death. We win over hell.

Paul goes on to say later in the chapter,

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

There will be no more victory for death. The last enemy has been exposed, defeated, and will be destroyed. “Come, “Jesus will say to you, “you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” You can count on it now! You will see it come to pass then! Amen.