

More than Summer

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, May 29, 2011, The Sixth Sunday of Easter.
Based on John 14:15-21.*

Early this week, shortly after the rapture had not occurred, I got an email from a less than reverent friend that read, "Now that the end did not come, what will you preachers preach about?" The world is filled with smart alecks. Well, it is true: life didn't end, but the Oprah show did. And that is pretty big! One friend from Texas, after reading my Crossroads piece about the aborted rapture, wrote that on the day following, when some were disappointed and others relieved, a huge billboard appeared. Some small reference to the Reverend Mr. Camping in the top left corner and then in huge black letters on a white billboard, these words were printed: "Awkward, isn't it?"

And the beat goes on. For now, and truly I expect for as long as we "live and move and have our being," as the scripture so beautifully says, we shall continue to contemplate life with its goings and comings of those we love. Such ponderings were clearly on the mind of the narrator of John when he wrote the words in the passage we have just heard. These comments of Jesus, at least as remembered by John, are part of his final words to the disciples, preparing them, as it were, for his departure and, even more, for their lives after it. Though this gospel was written several generations after Jesus' death, it contained a message that was immediately important to the community of John. This was a time of great discord in the community, lines drawn dark and deep between equally certain people of faith, often members of the same family, some seeing Jesus as the way, others not. Loss and the fear of it permeated the community. Was there enough of Jesus lingering in their midst, they must have wondered, to compel them to go forward, living as they believed he called them to live? Hearing again Jesus' promise to be present, to be with and in them, were cherished words of comfort.

Whatever the particulars, we too are people who do not want to be left alone. We too know something about leave-taking, the pain and sorrow associated with it, the way it leaves us anchorless. We too desire the presence of another, of one another, and most fundamentally the presence of God. Beyond doubt, these desires lie at the heart of what we seek in the practice of our faith. When we speak of God's action in the Communion, we call it Real Presence—not transubstantiation but Real Presence, a dramatic theological claim that when we gather as God's people, seeking to know and be known by God, God comes to us through this ritual in a way that is really present.

This weekend is the occasion of our annual observance of Memorial Day. On this holiday, I always pray that there will be in my life a time when soldiers are not dying, a peaceful period when our young and the young of other countries are not called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice for this or any country. Maybe naïve, my prayer is nonetheless deep and primal.

Even for the military, the story I am about to tell you is an unusual illustration of how there is no explaining where people meet and fall in love. This story bears witness to that. On Valentine's Day 1997 Max and Kim, U.S. soldiers, met while they were being trained to become part of the elite Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit. Amidst all that technical learning about bombs, they found their own spark of attraction and love and were married a couple of years later. In Iraq they dismantled bombs alongside one another, not talking about their fears or doubts, just doing their jobs. One night Max took the call that a bomb had been found; he dispatched Kim, who was nearer to the site, to defuse it. Max says, "That night she was at a different base and I tried to talk to her on the phone before she went—just to tell her, like, an extra, 'Be careful.' But she was already on her way to take care of it, so I didn't get to."

Kim never got to hear those words. She was severely wounded and died shortly after Max arrived at the field hospital, dying as he held her in his arms. Max Voelz didn't stay in the Army too long after Kim died. Now part of a relatively small group, he says, "I am an Army widower. I don't think there are very many of us. And when I receive a condolence letter from a high-ranking government official that says, 'Mrs. Voelz, we're sorry for the loss of your husband,' it just makes it seem like nobody knows we exist."

Reported this week on NPR's "Morning Edition Story Corps," this story takes my breath away. War involves real lives with real endings, and we are remiss if we allow the reality of war to live far from us. In the psyche and conscience of our nation, it must always live close. In her acclaimed book about the letters and poems left at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, *Shrapnel in the Heart*, my good friend and author, Laura Palmer, reminds us, "The flag on the coffin covers only the

obvious tragedy." Memorial Day is much more than the unofficial first day of summer. Regardless of what we say about war, whether we are pacifists or militarists, the presence of war in the world weaves its character into our souls in ways that far exceed its obvious purposes.

Loss—its reality, our fears about its ever-present possibility and inevitability—resides at the core of our humanness, defining in some fundamental ways what it means to be human and particularly what it means to be a human of faith. We do not want to lose those whom we love, finding ourselves alone and adrift. Max Voelz, the young widower, reports that now, several years after Kim was killed, he still is looking for a plan, a purpose, a way to go on without her. When we find the love of our lives, there is no Plan B, certainly not in the short term and sometimes not ever.

I lead a bible study each week which focuses on the gospel for the coming Sunday. This week when we read these words of Jesus to those who were preparing to face life without him, several people around the circle found deep resonance in his promise, "I will not leave you orphaned."

My sense is it struck many of us in that group because we are living without parents now or facing that possibility with each passing day. But it is more than that most primal desire for presence, the presence of our principal caretakers. Increasingly I am convinced that faith begins and ends with the question of aloneness. Our gospel today contains John's use of the Greek word, *parakletos*, translated in the NRSV as "advocate." One connotation of the word is that of "counselor," as in a court of law, an idea that can be found in some of the epistles, suggesting a view of Jesus as advocating on our part before God. But it also can be translated as "comforter" and is more generally understood as the presence of the spirit among and within us, the spirit that never leaves us, the spirit which means we shall not be orphaned no matter how alone we may feel.

Terrance Malik's new film, *The Tree of Life*, is a lot like life. It must be seen many times to make much sense of it; but also like life, to miss it is a huge mistake. Through the voice overlay of a young son in the family, we are given access, in the most amazing and moving way, to the interior of a child's mind. When we hear the whispered question laid over the action, "Where are you, God," we are presented, in a way that cinema rarely does, with the deepest question of our lives.

For our faith to mean anything to us, it must empower us to shape that question, "Where are you, God?" pointing us toward an answer that cannot be prematurely, if ever, emphatically grasped. But it's a question worthy of our every breath. As I left the film, I sensed a great connection between this little boy's wondering and the power of today's gospel. Surprisingly, from the pages of ancient holy writ, words read today, we are pointed to the truth—a truth, which abides in and with us, a truth that will never leave us comfortless. God is here, and we need not fear.

Let me leave these words for you written by the late poet, Jane Kenyon, in her poem, "Let Evening Come":

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

In the name of God. *Amen.*

©2011 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

*For information about St. Bartholomew's
and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads
write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022,
or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.*