

Dear Friends in Christ,

Valerius Maximus was a Roman author/historian, perhaps best known for his work "Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings" dated around 30 A.D. He stated, "The divine wrath is slow indeed in vengeance, but it makes up for its tardiness by the severity of the punishment."

Life can be very, very frustrating - *isn't it?* The reality of horrid, unspeakable crimes against others left without justice; the people who rise to high positions and then exploit, lie to and steal from others....well, none of it is lost on us! But, then, neither are your sin crimes - nor mine. Valerius Maximus' insight is accurate: "The divine wrath...makes up for its tardiness by the severity of the punishment." More importantly, God said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." (Rom. 12:19)

Remember the account of the rich man and Lazarus? I have never considered it a parable. I believe it was a real incident in which the Holy Spirit allows us a glimpse into the divine wrath. It's tied to these words of the man who had his everything in this world - everything but God: "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame." (Lk. 16:24)

What a blessing to know the love of God in Christ, right? And that, especially, when the final moment of life here arrives. And, again, it really doesn't make a difference as to age. Jesus: the One and only One who can and does lift us beyond the dread and fear of death. The question for this morning . . .

WHAT'S IT WORTH TO US?

I. I Caused.

It was the fourth stanza of the sermon hymn, "Upon the Cross Extended", that first came to mind when I considered this sermon: "I caused Your grief and sighing/ By evils multiplying/ As countless as the sands. I caused the woes unnumbered/ With which Your soul is cumbered/ Your sorrows raised by wicked hands."

I caused. You know, there are many aspects of Scripture that testify to the fact that it was not the product of human thinking; reasoning. The religions of the world say the same thing: Man is either basically good enough or capable enough to deserve or earn God's love.

I've asked the question on a person to person basis a multitude of times: "If God would to ask you why He should let you into Heaven what would you say?" The vast majority of the times the answers are, "Well, I would say I love Him." - which no one really does as God should be loved - or "I believe in Him." - which really says nothing. Believe what? I'd guess that it has to be one of the most disappointing verses in Scripture: "In this is love, not that we have loved God...". (1 Jn. 4:10a) If we truly love God we would, minimally, never think the things we want no one else to know...or see! The things we think all the time. And so, "I caused your grief and sighing..."

He felt sorry for me. Pity. Mercy. Loved me because He is love. **I caused Him** to love me so much that He would suffer and die and pay for my sins. The same for you. Think, again, on these words of the fifth stanza of our sermon hymn: "You died to ransom me. The cross for me enduring. The crown for me securing. You healed my wounds and set me free."

II. His Worth.

I remember, before being brought to faith, the fear of what was really going to happen to me after I died. What's on the other side? And to say, "Nothing!" is a brave statement while your heart is still beating and your lungs sucking in air. But to say "Nothing!" is pitiful.

And now, as one who knows Christ, what a horror to think of those who die and enter hell; unending darkness, burning and torment. The words are Christ's words, and leave little wonder as to why most of humanity has spent untold money, time, effort and persecution of those who follow Christ to disprove Christ's credibility:

"I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matt. 8:11,12)... He will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" (Matt. 25:41)

We've been spared from this. Though we find ourselves in a daily struggle with sin, for the sake of Christ, we are forgiven. That's the promise. "...the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 Jn. 1:7b) "Whoever believes will not perish..." (Jn. 3:16) "The wage of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ." (Rom. 6:23) We'll go into eternal heaven - uninterrupted happiness. All assured us now through Word and Sacrament.

So, what is support of Christ's church, His cause, and this congregation worth to us? Is it worth an updated wardrobe; another trip; an open space concept; another chunk of change for the next hi-tech gizmo? Is the Lord and His church worth dying for (if you don't mind the preposition at the end of the sentence)?

III. Saintly Stewards.

You noted that this Sunday of stewardship is also All Saints Day. Several times, over these years, I have quoted the following from Frank Wilson concerning the importance of this moment for the church. He wrote:

In early times of persecution acts of spiritual heroism occurred in many communities. Christians would see one of their own number give up his life for his faith, and they would feel justly proud of such an example of staunch fortitude... They did not mourn their dead, but rejoiced over them because their departure out of this world was the occasion of the new birth in the world-to-come... (Frank E. Wilson, "An Outline of the Christian Year," New York, Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1941, pp. 82-83)

I've read that many times for personal reflection; particularly those words, "Christians would see one of their own number give up his life for his faith, and they would feel justly proud of such an example of staunch fortitude..." "Give up his life." That's quite a witness, isn't it? The ultimate offering. I confess - I include myself here: the best most of us have given up for the faith is a small percentage of coin and time. And for a fair number, nothing but an overflowing bag of excuses.

And here I am: A very sinful human, covered in the blood of Christ, my daily sin daily forgiven, living with the promises of God's love and Presence in Word and Sacrament, looking forward to The New Heaven and the New Earth. And you are here with me.

And the Words of John are always there, preparing us:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first earth had passed away (this earth and its decay, destruction, derision and death)...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev. 21:1-4)

I doubt if there's person here who has not confronted the death of a loved one, shed tears as a result of the sorrows and hurts that come into life because of a fallen world, felt the pain of a broken heart or a broken body. Because of God's love in Christ, all that will be taken away - forever.

I said the following once, some years ago; I'll say it again: "He calls us not to be deceived into thinking that the goal of our faith here is the highest degree of comfort and happiness we can attain with this world, but to understand that the people who hated His son - marched Him to the Cross for preaching the truth about human sin - crucified Him - killed His Apostles - and have persecuted the church down through the centuries - those people and that mind-set are as much a part of our time as ever before."

We have been given much. Everything! We have everything in Christ. God's Presence now - His love, promises, and hope of Heaven - and His face to face Presence upon our entrance into eternity. What a blessing to be able to say and know, as the saints of the past confessed: "I'm going to heaven when my pilgrimage here is finished."

It's a fair question. I wish I could read your minds for the answer. When it comes to stewardship - use of money, time and abilities - what's it worth to us: God's eternal love in Christ. What's it worth - to you?

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott

ALL SAINTS DAY

STEWARDSHIP

November 6, 2016

Revelation 21:1-4: “What’s It Worth To Us?

I. I Caused.

II. His Worth.

III. Saintly Stewards.

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