



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 18, 2019

“Precious in His Sight is the Death of His Saints “
(Psalm 116:15)
Rev. David K. Groth

*“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his
saints” (Ps. 116:15).*

Collect: Merciful Lord, cleanse and defend Your Church by the sacrifice of Christ. United with Him in Holy Baptism, give us grace to receive with thanksgiving the fruits of his redeeming work and daily follow in His way; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

One year Gail and I had opportunity to visit a number of the civil war battle sites out east. The most memorable to me was Fredericksburg in Virginia, mostly because the site has been well preserved and you can still picture what happened. Union troops crossed the Rappahannock River on pontoon bridges and then tried to charge 400 yards up a hill, (an empty field), to engage the Confederate army. The Confederates enjoyed the advantage of the high ground. Their artillery was already sighted in, and they had the additional advantage of a sunken road that ran along the top of the high ground. It served as a ready made trench for their troops. Infantry were stationed four deep in this sunken road, pouring unbroken volleys on those who managed to survive the cannon fire.

I'm no military strategist, but even I could see this was no place to choose to engage the enemy. Fighting uphill, with no cover, against a well-entrenched enemy . . . it was insane. The Confederates couldn't believe it either. One Confederate soldier said, "A chicken could not live on that field when we open on it."

However, the Union had at least one advantage: raw numbers. The south couldn't replace fallen soldiers so easily, but the north knew it could. Besides, there was pressure coming from DC to engage the enemy before the onset of winter. So, on December 13, 1862 at 8:30 in the morning, Gen. Burnside gave the order to attack. Union soldiers poured out into the open along a five mile front. A soldier from New Orleans by the name of William Owen wrote, "How beautifully they came on . . . looking like a huge serpent of blue and steel . . . We could see our shells bursting in their ranks, making great gaps; but on they came . . . Now we gave them canister, and that staggered them. A few more paces onward and the Georgians in the road below us rose up and let loose a storm of lead into the faces of the advancing brigade. This was too much; the column hesitated, and then, turning, took refuge behind the bank. . . But another line appeared

from behind the crest and advanced gallantly, and again we opened our guns on *them*". Fourteen assaults were beaten back before Burnside decided the hill could not be taken. (*The Civil War*, Geoffrey Ward, 171ff.) In one day at the battle of Fredericksburg, the Union lost over 12,000 men. 12,000! A Union private wrote, our generals "kill men as Herod killed the innocents."

Life is precious to the Lord, but among men, life can be deemed pretty cheap. Generals can be reckless with life, but so can we. By the time he reaches 18, the average American child will have witnessed over 200,000 acts of violence on T.V., including 40,000 murders. Researchers are saying it's increasing in quantity but also becoming more graphic, so we are becoming desensitized. Directors have to push the edges to elicit the same reaction. Psalm 139 says, "You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." But on T.V., those fearfully, wonderfully made bodies with the help of special effects are graphically hacked, stabbed, shot, burned, crushed and blown to bits all in the name of entertainment. Our text says "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." Not so much on T.V., or at the movies, or within video games.

There are lots of ways we have made life cheap. We cheapen life with physician assisted suicide where we see death as a solution rather than the last enemy, and induce death rather than give compassionate care. For Christians it's not care at all costs. But there's a great vast difference between letting nature take its course and introducing poison.

We cheapen life with legalized abortion, again, looking at death as a solution. It's not expensive; in fact in most forms abortion is cheap. Many rationalize it by thinking that in many cases the child is no larger than the tip of a pencil, so it doesn't even look like a human being. That has always puzzled me because that's exactly what a human being is supposed to look shortly after conception. It's what you and I looked like.

We cheapen life when we tolerate the violence that goes on every day in our country. In the 10:00 pm news, another day, another murder, in Milwaukee . . . so long as it stays in the inner city, we don't give it much thought. Similarly, we cheapen life

when our compassion for victims following a natural disaster is muted and mitigated by skin color or nationality.

We cheapen life when we teach our children that human life came about accidentally, and is therefore ultimately meaningless.

We can cheapen life in much smaller ways as well, such as with poor stewardship of time. Say on average you watch three hours of television a day. That's 21 hours a week, 1100 hours a year. That's 46 days out of every year spent in front of the T.V. Today's children watch more hours of TV in a year than they spend in school, and that's before you throw in video games and social media.

There are a lot of ways to cheapen life. We cheapen it when we don't take time to visit an old aunt in the hospital because we think we're too busy. We cheapen it, I think, when we don't make time for the funerals.

In the midst of all that, here comes the minority voice: Psalm 116:15, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15). Not just our lives, but even our deaths are precious to him!

When something is precious to us, we guard it and take care of it. We don't leave it insecure, and vulnerable. We know where it is at all times. We're not going to let it be stolen away. In this way our lives, even our deaths are precious to the Lord. He guards us, takes care of us, doesn't leave us unattended, knows at all times where we are with it and, in our weakness, isn't going to let us be snatched from his hand, his grace. Like a Shepherd, he watches over his flock always, because he's not a part-time shepherd, and because our lives are precious to him. But when one of us is dying he is vigilant and protective then too, because our deaths are precious to him.

Death is no trifling matter to the Lord. He doesn't lightly suffer it to come about. He doesn't barter with your life like a pawn on a chess board, or like a general feeling the pressure to engage the enemy before the onset of winter. No, your life, your death is precious to him. However it happens, it won't be accidental or random or outside of his knowledge or control. From Psalm 139, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (v.16).

A number of times I've been with people as they've died. Please don't take this wrong, but I've always felt privileged to have been there. (Not that I would choose it for a hobby. It takes a toll.) However, I do believe it's a holy moment, a moment belonging to God, a moment important to him, because "precious in his sight is the death of his saints." It's holy ground, because he's there in all his goodness and grace, watching, holding, keeping.

Think of it this way. It's probably easier for you to see your own blood than it is for you to see your child bleeding from a gash in the leg. That's the way it is for the Lord! Ps. 72:14, "Precious is their blood in his sight." Think of it: He stopped the bleeding of the guard's ear in Gethsemane. However, he did not stop his own bleeding. Such is his love for us, that it was easier for Jesus to see his own blood on the cross than it is to see yours.

When we lose blood, or give blood, we get thirsty. From the cross Jesus said, "I thirst." A jar of sour wine was there, so, in a small act of kindness and compassion, someone soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it up to Jesus' lips. When he received the drink, John says, he said, "It is finished" and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Many times I've been with people who were so sick, so helpless, that they couldn't hold a cup of water or drink from a straw. All they could do was open their lips a little to receive moisture from a little sponge on a stick.

So closely Jesus identifies with us that he's experienced firsthand this extreme helplessness before death. As true man and true God, Jesus didn't "cheat" when it came to his death on the cross. He didn't use his divine powers to make it any easier. All he could do was open his lips a little and receive a bit moisture from a sponge on a stick. The Son of God knew extreme disability. He knew extreme helplessness. He couldn't do anything. He knew extreme weakness and humiliation. He who had helped so many others because their lives were precious to him, could not now help himself. Why? Because our lives are precious to him too. That's why he was there, to redeem our lives. Sin and death owned us lock, stock and barrel. But on the

cross, Jesus died so that our sins could be forgiven and we could live eternally. He did that because life is precious to him.

On earth, life and death can become pretty cheap. Not so with the Lord. The woman who's dying of stage four cancer, she remains the apple of his eye. The curmudgeon who was never easy to love when young and healthy, and even less so old and in constant pain . . . still precious in the sight of the Lord. The one who has outlived the love of his friends has not outlived the love of his Lord. The sinner who pretended God wasn't watching, or didn't care that much, but as that sinner lies dying, God is watching, and does care passionately, because he still loves and wants to save.

He numbers our days, and they are precious to him, also the last one. That day that is so profound and impactful and imposing to us . . . it's important to him too. It's holy ground around the death bed. It belongs to him. He's there, leaning in, watching, comforting. He's there, holding you and keeping you in the arms of his love, because precious in his sight is the death of his saints. Then. . . on the other side of death, life . . . eternal life, and with all the saints and angels, with all the company of heaven, and with him. . . Christ the Lord. Amen.

