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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Fifth Sunday in Lent (Music: Faure *Requiem*)
March, 2006

Philippians 3.4b-14
John 12.1-8

Homily: “Resting in Christ”

“...I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” – Philippians 3.8

Today, we turn toward death. We do so in multiple ways. As the season of Lent nears its end, the shadow of Jerusalem and Holy Week looms large. Jesus is moving toward his death. Mary understood this and anointed Jesus’ feet with costly perfume—using the ceremonial symbol of death to acknowledge that Jesus’ death was approaching. Judas did not understand it. He wasn’t thinking of death, but only of the mundane financial accountings of this life. He missed the point of Mary’s prophetic action. In a manner of speaking, he wasn’t aware of the calendar—he didn’t realize it was the fifth Sunday in Lent. He thought it was just “ordinary” time.

In our Philippians passage, the Apostle Paul knows the time and season. He is struggling with understanding his life accomplishments (considerable!) in light of the eternal meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection. “Whatever gains I had,” he writes, “these I have come to regard everything as loss because of the Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

This moment in time radically relativizes our present experience—our triumphs as well as our fears—because the impending death of Jesus intercedes so dramatically. Our understanding of death, and therefore our understanding of life, is about to change.

This liturgical context makes for an intriguing and inventive use of the Faure *Requiem*. Strictly speaking, this music belongs in a funeral, or might be used on All Soul’s Day. But John Gerry-Karajanes’ idea of using it today is very appropriate. Faure, using the words of the Requiem Mass, helps us to “turn toward death” in a beautiful way. The word “requiem” is Latin for “rest.” The Mass is named for the first line: “Rest eternal grant to them, O Lord.” We can view death as rest only because Christ has gone there ahead of us.

John wrote me an e-mail a couple of weeks ago: “As I finished up and shut down the organ after practicing I suddenly had this feeling of awe at the sheer beauty of the piece. As I thought about that I got a real clear sense that Faure must have purposely created that exquisite sound to communicate and describe the “rest”.....the “requiem” that is the gift of death in Christ. If that “rest” that finally comes through death in Christ, has the quality of such beauty as the music presents.....well, WOW!” Gabriel Faure is thought not to have had especially strong religious beliefs, but the music makes me wonder. What was not there by virtue of intellectual assent may very well have been there by way of musical instinct. Another way of saying this may be to say that for Faure, the accent was on the human aspect of faith, rather than faith’s object. Of the Requiem, he says, it “is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest.”

And so we have beautiful melodies drawing us into reflection on death. Faure’s own words tend to support John’s intuition that the sound was created to communicate the “rest” that is the gift of death in Christ: “It has been said that my Requiem does not express the fear of death and someone has called it a lullaby of death. But it is thus that I see death: as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience...perhaps I have also instinctively sought to escape from what is thought right and proper, after all the years of accompanying burial services on the organ! I know it all by heart. I wanted to write something different.”¹

The texts and traditions of Holy Week help us to “write something different” in our hearts about death. Because we know the story of Jesus going on to death before us, we can set aside our fears and instead rest...truly rest...in Christ.

Let us pray. Lord, help us once again to absorb the story of Jesus’ movement toward death. Allow his death to change our perspective about the deaths that we face and fear in our lives. Amen.

¹ Background material found in articles on Faure and the Requiem at www.wikipedia.org.