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Matthew 25:1-13
November 6, 2011

I think that clearly Dietrich Bonhoeffer's best advice to Christians on how they ought to conduct themselves would be this. He said, "Never talk about anyone unless that person is present." Never talk about anyone unless that person is present. Of course, this is the day we make an exception to this, don't we? This is the day when we talk about those who are not here, those whom we have loved and have lost. Did you hear it when we sang "Our hearts are brave again?" We're brave to come into this place. We do not fear to name those whom we have loved and whom we have lost.

Awhile back, I had the privilege of being in a British war cemetery. The British war cemetery is not in the United Kingdom; it is in Italy. Striking, isn't it – those young British soldiers to fight the Axis Powers in World War II came ashore in Italy. Many of them died and they were buried there. It is right at the foot of the city of Assisi. It is a beautiful cemetery, and you can linger there for

hours because as you read each tombstone, some message from home has been engraved there – "Our dear beloved son – he was the light of our life. He was a wonderful father. He was a precious brother" – etc.

Thinking about this distance in death, I was reminded of something that I read at about that same time from Wendell Berry's wonderful novel "Jayber Crow." In that story, Jayber is reflecting over deaths during World War II and here's what he says about where death happens:

"I had always imagined that soldiers who were killed in war just disappear from the places where they are killed. Their deaths may be remembered by their comrades but their deaths will not be remembered where they happened. They will not be remembered in the halls of government. Where do dead soldiers die who were killed in battle? They die back home. In Port William and thousands of other little darkened places and thousands upon thousands of houses...where the news

comes and everything on the tables and shelves is all of a sudden a relic and a reminder forever."

Where does death happen? Sometimes it happens in an intensive care unit or perhaps in a Hospice house. Or maybe death happens in another state. But where death really happens is back home on a lonely night when you wake up and you want to say something but there's no one to say something to. And you hear some piece of an old song that you had loved and shared. Death happens back home.

Death also happens here. Death happens here in the church. On days like today, All Saints Day, on Easter Sunday, on Christmas Eve, in fact, on every Sunday we come into this place and we think of those we have loved and lost, and we are brave to say that they are not really gone. We say "Blessed are they," and they're not blessed because of the greatness of who they were. They are blessed because of God. A God who loves us so much that God will never let one of us slip from his grip. Blessed are they because of God.

Last week, I mentioned the death of Pope John XXIII. When the news came that he was very near death, indeed, his secretary collapsed to the floor in tears. Pope John reached out, laid his hand on his head and said "I am ready. I must die with majesty and simplicity." He did not say this because he was the Pope or a great man. He said this because he was a Christian, because he was a child of God, "I am ready. I must die with majesty and simplicity." And so can we, so must we be ready. Are we ready to die? Are we ready to commend those we love to God?

There's an old story about a mother who came in to wake her son to go to church. She said "Wake up. It's Sunday morning." He said "I don't want to go to church." She said "Wake up, you've got to go to church." He said "I don't want to go, it's going to be boring." She said "No, no, no, wake up, you must go." He said "Why must I go?" She said, "Well, because you're the preacher." Why is that so funny? We get up and go – but there are people who think you can just lie in bed and be a Christian, but

no, no, no. Christians are those who get up out of bed and they go somewhere. Christians are those who rise up and go to another place. Christians rise up and go to another place.

We move around in church, don't we? We have processions like the one we had this morning. The choir didn't just wander up here gradually. They processed in. There's some dignity; there's some order.

Daniel Radcliffe, the great Catholic theologian, wrote this about such things:

"The beauty of the church was intended to evoke the end of our final pilgrimage, our journey to paradise, but it is still a reminder that we are on the way. We drag ourselves out of bed and leave our houses because they are not our final homes. Monks and many other Christians are always having processions. When we go from one place to another we don't just do it helter skelter; we go in procession. We process into church; we process out of church. As monks, we process to a meal. We process

around our property. I am glad for all this marching about. It could seem weird, but I experience it as an extra in my life, something in my day that it would not have were I not a monk or a Christian. And so, I am reminded again and again that I am not just vaguely moving through life. In my life I am inserted into the definitive procession of Jesus Christ. I am part of a huge movement, a definitive exodus. I am going somewhere."

Brothers and sisters, you left your home this morning, but that home is not your final home. We are going somewhere.

When St. Francis of Assisi was very near death, he was far from home, and he asked those who were grieving around him if they would pick up his dying body and carry it back to the church that he treasured above all others, St. Mary of the Angels. He had rebuilt it with his own hands. So his friends picked him up and carried him on that long journey back to his church. Just as

they came to the entrance before he breathed his last, he said this: "I have done what is mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours to do."

Brothers and sisters, you came this morning from a place that is not your final home. We are going somewhere.

Thanks be to God.