

“GOOD HAUNTINGS,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, November 7, 2021

Congregation, I’m haunted. I talk to dead people. All the time. If it’s not my mother, it’s my father. And, very often, a grandmother. These were people close to me in life. They remain close to me in death—ten, twenty, thirty plus years after the fact. I talk with them when I’m doing something I know they would like. I turn to them when, reflecting back, I’m puzzled about something that happened which bothers me still. I talk to them remembering the joy of happy times together. Sometimes the conversations are just in my head. Yet other times they are spontaneously aloud, a surprise even to me because it all just seems to come out of my subconscious.

In these talking moments I used to worry that folks in my perimeter might think I’m loco. Fortunately, today, however, I don’t have to feel so strange in talking aloud to my departed family because there always seems to be someone else around using a cell phone ear plug, talking into the air. Those cell phone talkers give me cover.

I don’t know if others have similar conversations with late loved ones in everyday life like me. But I have been at the bedside of many men and women dying who strike up conversations with late spouses, parents, and siblings. Not infrequently, they may even have visions of these family members all set to welcome them to eternal life ahead.

Some not already experienced in this realm may find it creepy. Yet I find it comforting, as those dying mostly do too. It’s all a testimony to our belief in the resurrection that God makes possible for us in Jesus as proclaimed in our morning gospel lesson. (*John 14:1-3, 18-19*) It also speaks to the fact that though we may have to say goodbye to loved ones pushing off from this mortal life to be clothed in immortality with Jesus, they remain with us here and now as an abiding spiritual presence.

Although it undoubtedly was something deeper and greater than anything we can know with our own loved ones, the apostles experienced Jesus’ spiritual presence after his crucifixion. Jesus was so bodily real to them after the Easter resurrection that both Mary Magdalene and the Apostle Thomas wanted to reach out and touch him. (*John 20:17; 20:24-31*) The intensity of their experience of the risen Christ faded with time. However, weeks—maybe months—later during the Jewish harvest festival of Pentecost Jesus’ disciples felt his presence and proximity, albeit a little differently, in a fresh, deeply spiritual way. (*Acts 2:1-47*) Indeed, the Holy Spirit that came upon them was the Spirit of Christ. Suddenly, Jesus’ disciples felt wonderfully close to him again, remembering everything that he had taught them through his earthly ministry and readier for the fact to follow his example and guidance in life ahead.

The rest of the Bible is replete with stories of the apostles and disciples who found themselves talking with Jesus. On the now fabled road to Damascus, the Apostle Paul,

then known by his Jewish name Saul and working as a bounty hunter persecuting Christians, distinctly heard Jesus ask him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 8:1; 9:1-9) Paul’s roadside conversation with the risen Christ turned his life around for the good. A mean, vicious man became the evangelist and defender of the Christian faith, sharing a gospel all about a loving and gracious God.

Likewise, another man named Ananias, already a devout Christian, heard the Lord Jesus Christ calling him to get ready to welcome a temporarily blinded Saul into his own household. (Acts 9:10-22) Given Saul’s fiercely bad reputation before he became Paul, Ananias was initially full of fear and trepidation about extending the hospitality divinely requested of him. But that sense of terror was lifted as he and Jesus talked it out. Consequently, Ananias could be entirely sincere and gracious in welcoming Saul to his household, even blessing him in a powerful way which brought this unexpected guest healing. Yes, talking with Jesus, as well as talking with departed loved ones, can be a healthy thing.

Of course, while Jesus really can and does speak to us, our conversations with others resurrected with him may be more imaginative than anything else. All the same, that doesn’t necessarily make those conversations less healthy and healing. Working with troubled patients who have wrenching decisions to make, counselors and psychotherapists will sometimes ask them, “What do you think your late husband or wife might say about this? What would they advise you to do?” Not infrequently, the patient knows the answer to that question and can hear their loved one guiding them as if in life. There’s a wonderful sense of release and relief afterwards.

Weird as it sounds, this can work in reverse too. Years and years ago, one of our very own members reported to me that her own mother was not a real mom. Never did she act very maternally and protectively. She was full of bad, misleading advice too. But, as our member proceeded to tell me, things got better when she realized that, instead of following in the way of her mother, she as daughter simply had to take a different path. This meant talking to Jesus more in prayer, seeking his guidance. And in those moments when she still felt inexplicably impelled to consult her late mother, she would imagine what mom most likely would have done and do the exact opposite! However crazy that may sound, it worked for her. Thanks to Jesus and some creative, inversionary thinking on this gal’s part, all turned out well.

In my own pastoral work, I often encourage folks to literally speak up, out loud, in forgiveness to those already deceased who have emotionally and spiritually hurt or damaged us, guided by the wise proverb which warns us that *the one who can’t forgive digs two graves*. Quite similarly, expressing belated yet sincere gratitude to those already beyond this life whom we didn’t appreciate or cherish in a more timely way, can also be

helpful to us, the living. While forgiveness can liberate us from an anger that eats away at us, better-late-than-never, spoken aloud, thankfulness and gratitude on our part can free us from regret and guilt that can also weigh us down. Both anger and guilt inevitably consume psychic or soul energy in us that doesn't benefit anyone—and certainly not our own well-being.

At the same time, if we're too self-conscious or embarrassed to talk aloud to ourselves, articulating our forgiveness, contrition, or thankfulness through a written letter will also do. Indeed, writing out what we're thinking and feeling in a letter to the departed can help us clarify our emotions and make our reconciliation with those we need to forgive or belatedly thank more effective and lasting. We don't have to send that letter anywhere. Because we've already sent it in our heart. Meanwhile, we can keep what we've written as a memento of our sincere desire for mutual peace and reconciliation. A letter is also something we can re-read at a later date if and when lingering traces of anger or guilt revisit us and we need to remind ourselves of the commitment we've already made to forgiveness or thankfulness.

Of course, more privately taking all this to God in prayer, just as the gal with mother problems did, can further fortify us in healing. God in his grace can help us keep accountable in our resolve and commitment to make full reconciliation with the departed and resurrected stick. Exercising forgiveness and thankfulness in our continuing relationships with those who have departed this life are two of the most life empowering, life-renewing things that we as Christians can do. If the need for reconciliation is real, it's important to work on it in all of the above ways—now, today, or tomorrow.

I don't want to spook anyone out, but our church life is all about communion with the departed. They remain part of the Body of Christ that the Apostle Paul in his ministry celebrated. Indeed, as the man who was once Saul reminds all the faithful in his New Testament Letter to the Ephesians, we are to be “no longer stranger and sojourners, but...fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” (*Ephesians 2:19-22*)

The saints and prophets of whom Paul speaks may be all or mostly deceased. Yet they live still in spirit and participate through their abiding legacies in the present living of the church. Sometimes their presence as spiritual citizens may go unnoticed and unrecognized. However, because they were who they were and shared their faith in our midst, we are indelibly changed people. We are the beneficiaries of their faithfulness and the good they taught and did, which lingers and endures.

At the outset I mentioned those departed family members I talk to. Yet in the same way I can't walk through our church without saying hello—and joyfully so—to those who have graced this place in faith and gone on to God. I still see Mrs. Louise Wiegel in her jaunty blue jacket seated on the bench outside our parlor patiently waiting for her daughter, Barb. And I can virtually hear Harry Thompson singing loudly and enthusiastically from the chancel choir's west back row and Lil Cope in the opposite choir pews smiling. There's Royce Medley, too, waiting for me in the center aisle after service, challenging me just a little on what I preached from the pulpit that morning. Not to be overlooked, either, are the Bronnis, husband and wife, who every Sunday following worship cleaned up the pews of the litter we had left behind. In fact, congregation, I feel the palpable presence of so many, many more in this sacred space. We may no longer exactly see them as we once did. Yet I haven't forgotten them and will continue to remember what they brought to this place and have shared with us.

Yes, these are hauntings. But good hauntings. Beautiful hauntings. Blessed hauntings. And I feel encouraged by all these faithful departed as I carry on each day as God calls me to do. I hope you feel encouraged too and blessed by this greater communion of the faithful that not even death can sunder or dissipate. May each of us as men and women together in Christ find our peace with the departed and be comforted and strengthened in the knowledge that any past troubles can be healed and whatever good and loving deeds we do linger as our legacy. **Amen.**