

REFORMATION AND ALL SAINTS DAY : "The Day When Nobody Died?" Hebrews 12:1-3

"If everyone cared and nobody cried, if everyone loved and nobody lied, if everyone shared and swallowed their pride, we'd see the day when nobody died." Some of our younger members might recognize that as the chorus to a song by Nickelback, a popular rock group. When I hear music I listen carefully to the words and these words caught my attention. What if everyone cared and nobody cried? What if everyone loved and nobody lied? What if everyone shared and swallowed their pride? We'd see the day when nobody died.

The world would certainly be a better place. But could it really bring about a day when nobody died. I mean really, could we bring about an end to senseless killing? I thought "how idealistic." In fact I would say it is Pollyannaic to suggest that kind of change is possible by the human race and that we could bring an end to senseless killing.

Nickelback really makes its point though in its video. With the music as the background the video for this song tells the stories of four people who did make an impact in their world. It tells of Bob Geldorf who championed the "Live Aid" concert and raised millions to alleviate world hunger. It tells of Betty Williams who led a march for peace in Northern Ireland and won the Nobel Peace Prize. It tells the story of Peter Benenson who led a letter writing campaign on behalf of political prisoners and eventually founded Amnesty International, a group that works for human rights and an end to torture. And they tell of Nelson Mandela who fought against apartheid in South Africa and eventually became that country's first ethnically African president.

Well, Nickelback makes a point. Yes, these people did make some difference in the world. But just look at the world we live in. People literally blow themselves up to kill others every day. Can we really dream of a day when nobody died in this world? Yet there are plenty of Christians who have dreamed of a world where people cared and loved and swallowed their pride.

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was born in Albania in 1910. As a child she dreamed of becoming a missionary and at the age of 18 she left home to become a nun when she took the name most know her by "Teresa." Most of then Sister Teresa's work was with the poor in India. Later as her work grew she became Mother Teresa and founded the Sisters of Charity. One of their early works was a hospice. They would take in people who were dying in the streets and would care for them. Mother Teresa said of this ministry; "A beautiful death is for people who lived like animals to die like angels - loved and wanted." The work she started continues today as many others bring the love of God to people in need.

Another Christian who dreamed of a world where people loved and cared and shared was John Wesley and the early Methodists. Not only were they methodical about the study of the Bible and their prayer lives, hence the name "Methodists," they were also methodical about the care for the poor & needy. They taught the poor to read and cared for the medical and material needs of people. The early Methodists are known for creating the middle class in Britain and preventing the same kind of violent social revolution that happened in other European countries in the 18th and 19th centuries. And those ministries of caring for the needy and spreading "scriptural holiness" continue through the many churches that trace their roots back to John Wesley and the Holy Club.

But even here in the United States in the recent past people have dreamed of a day when nobody died. Clarence Jordan was a Southern Baptist preacher with PhD in Greek who grew up in Georgia. He is most famous for his imaginative "translations" of the New Testament known as the Cotton Patch Gospels in which he places Jesus in 20th century Georgia. But some don't know that in the 40's he started a Christian Community farm in rural Georgia that tried to embody Christian Principles. Through 50's and 60's this Christian community continued to welcome people of all races who sought to live a Christian life. The interracial nature of the community made it a target for persecution in the 50's and 60's. The impact of the witness of the "Koinonia" community and the Cotton Patch Gospels continues. But also out of this community grew the Habitat for Humanity ministry which helps needy families work their way out of poverty. My oldest son is the EX. Director of Habitat for Humanity in Athens and is running for mayor of Athens/Clarke County. It is a bi-partisan position. He would appreciate your prayers.

Since this is All Saints Day let's look back at one life that made a difference and that is John Calvin. Calvin has not always been popular as person who longed for a day when nobody died. He has been neglected based on principle alone. Some resorted to taking his last name, dropping the two middle consonants and calling him Cain, who in the Bible killed his brother. This year marks the 500 year of his birth and he was considered a shy French lawyer in his day. He has been making an incredible comeback. He was the major 2nd wave of theologians after Luther to have a major impact on the Christian world. He is now recognized as one of the most consequential thinkers of the past millennium. A few months ago time magazine published a story on the top ten forces that are currently changing the world. The renaissance of Calvinism is rated number three. Can you believe that? Another rock group, U2, had an album in 2009 with a song called, No Line on the Horizon. Part of it says, "I was born to ring for you//I didn't have a choice but to lift you up." Then with the refrain, "Justified until we die//you and I will magnify//the Magnificent." That is pure Calvinism as it speaks of justified till you die, we will magnify (give glory to) the Magnificent (caps to signify God)."

One of the mysteries of the mystique of Calvinism is how such a high predestinarian theology could motivate so many followers to such intense this-worldly activism. Calvin changed society with theology and thinking that left us with some pretty significant features of government that we treasure today such as the rule of law, limitation of powers, and a democratic approach to government. We live in a better system of government that protects us and gives us freedoms we would not have had it not been for Calvin. It is easy to say that the Ana-Baptist rejected the world as a realm of darkness to be shunned, and Luther accepted the world as a necessary evil, Calvin sought to overcome the world, to transform and reform the world on the basis of the Word of God. He believed the Gospels needed to be preached not just in monasteries and seminaries but in real ghettos and back streets which would reform the world. Gospel means good news and the poor and ill need the Good News that God loves them and cares for them and we are instruments of God's work. Calvin emphasized the sacredness of human life and the capacity of human beings made in the image of God to think, to know, and to act with nobility rather than like barbarians that blow themselves up to kill others. Calvin knew that to live by the power of the Spirit would transform people and therefore the world. Do you think Calvin may have had an idea that adhering to the Word of God could produce a world when there was a day nobody died at the hands of others? Absolutely!!!!

The Bible also speaks of people who dreamed of a different world. It tells of people of faith like Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Paul and Peter. And it says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." So people have made a difference in the world. There have been those who by faith lived lives of caring and sharing and love. But people still continue to die needless senseless deaths. Is there any hope for "the day when nobody died?" Yes!!

But look what else the Bible says: "Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart." Jesus' death made possible the lives of all those saints I just mentioned. Can one man's life make a difference? With all humility, and giving some credit to Nickelback, I have to admit: yes, one life can make a difference. Because Jesus' life and death has made a real difference and will continue to until we come to that day when nobody dies. That is why the Presbyterian Church has done great deeds throughout the world to bring justice and love; tearing down the walls that separate us from a phony world view to a realistic world view where people are dying of hunger and being tortured; but also where the color of your skin does not matter but the worthiness of your soul transformed by the living God makes all the difference in the world. That is who we are as a church. As theologian Elizabeth Achtemier says, "The Christian life is no fairytale; in the power of the Spirit it can be lived."

Ironically there is hope for "the day when nobody died" because of the day that somebody, Jesus, died for the world. So inspired by the witness of the saints of God, let us dream. "If everyone cared and nobody cried, if everyone loved and nobody lied, if everyone shared and swallowed their pride, we'd see the day when nobody died."