

January 21, 2024 – Genesis 9:1-15 & Ephesians 2:1-10 (Sanctity of Life Sunday)

Charlotte Elliott was a bright young woman living in London during the early 19th c. She was well-educated. She had an amazing talent for music and art and poetry. She surrounded herself with the London social life. And she had no use for religion at all.

And then, at the age of 32 years old, Charlotte became ill. We don't know exactly what the disease was, but it left her weak, filled with pain, and prone to constant sickness. The social circles that once surrounded her vanished. Charlotte felt like her life had ended.

But from these pieces, she found something new: faith. A pastor visited her and, though she initially rejected his attempts at evangelism, eventually she opened up to him. And she admitted that she had no idea what she needed to do to become a Christian. He told her kindly, “Come just as you are.”

Years passed. Charlotte did not grow physically stronger, but she did grow spiritually stronger. Though she struggled at times with feeling useless. A burden to her father and then her brother, who took care of her. What could she possibly offer to the Kingdom of God when she could barely walk? When others were constantly taking care of her.

Eventually, though, she learned to take all that talent for music and poetry and applied it to a new task: writing hymns. In 1836, she and a friend – who was equally debilitated with tuberculosis – published a hymnal that they called “The Invalid's Hymn Book.” And among its pages were these words, written by Charlotte, echoing the pastor who had spoken to her more than a decade prior:

“Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”
Her brother, who was himself a pastor, would later comment, “In the course of a long ministry, I hope I have been permitted to see some fruit of my labours; but I feel far more has been done by a single hymn of my sister's.”

Indeed, that hymn is now considered to be one of the most translated hymns ever written. A hymn that has become so well-known partially because it was played at virtually every single Billy Graham Crusade. The work of a woman who was worried that she was useless to the Kingdom of God.

That fear of being useless, that despair over being a burden, is one that I hear often as a pastor. It seems like it's been expressed by just about every shut-in I've visited. “I'm useless, pastor. I can't do anything, pastor. Why does God still keep me around?”

Today, we recognize Sanctity of Life Sunday. A day created by the pro-life movement as a rejection of the sin of abortion. And yet, in many ways, the proliferation of abortion in this country was just the tip of the iceberg. We are dealing with a culture that is dealing with much larger, further reaching issues than just abortion.

We're dealing with a culture that is atheist, amoral, hedonistic, and utterly materialistic. Simply put, the average American today doesn't know why they are alive. They don't know why their own life has value or meaning. Which is why they don't know why their unborn child's life has value or meaning.

It's no wonder that the rate of suicide in this country is at the highest it's been since the Great Depression. It's no wonder that we have shootings in schools and churches and shopping malls. It's no wonder that our cities have become cesspools of violent crime. There are so many people who have simply lost the will to live. Who have no regard for taking a life because they put no value in their own life. So as big and important as abortion is as an issue, I fear it's more of a symptom than a disease.

So what do we do about this? Well, you'll notice when I listed off the problematic aspects of our culture, I started with one that is incredibly important: we have become increasingly atheistic. Or, at the very least, agnostic. Which basically means, “Don't know, don't care.” Is there a God? Maybe. Maybe not. It doesn't matter.

But it does matter. And our Old Testament lesson demonstrates that. Here we have Noah and his family immediately after the Flood. They get off the ark, Noah offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord for bringing he and his family through the Flood, and then God speaks to Noah. He tells them to be fruitful and multiply, just as he commanded Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He tells them that they have every plant for food and every animal to eat.

And then he tells them something interesting and important. He tells them, “Don't eat any animal with it's blood still in it.” That's kind of odd. Why does God care whether there's still blood in the animal's flesh?

Well, he says that while he gives the animals to us as food, the animal's blood is where it's life is. And that lifeblood belongs to God. The lifeblood of animals belongs to God. And, more importantly, the lifeblood of people belongs to God.

You see, back in Genesis 6, it says that God grew angry and decided to flood the earth in the first place because of how violent mankind had become. Human beings no longer gave life value or meaning. They killed each other without regard to the life that God had given them.

And that's where things start to break down in an atheistic culture. In an atheistic culture, there is no such thing as “life,” really. There's clumps of cells undergoing complex biological processes. But, from a atheistic, scientific perspective, “life” is a very difficult – if not impossible – thing to define. Which means that taking life – ending life – is a very vague, undefined thing to do. Because what is “life” in the first place? And why does it matter that it's ended?

Life only has value if you have a creator who gives it value. And so God says to us, “This lifeblood has value. It's important. It doesn't belong to you. You cannot just take it for yourself. It is mine and mine alone. And I decide when it can be taken. Because I made you. You are in my image.”

Except that we're not in his image, are we? Not anymore. We were made in his image. We were formed out of the dust of the earth by God's own hands. We had his Spirit breathed into us. We came alive by the lifeblood he gave to us. For a time, we had God's image.

But then we lost that image. Spiritually, we destroyed that image. For we rejected the God who made us. Rejected his command. Rejected his authority. And on the day that we ate of that fruit that he told us not to eat, we died. And so we are born dead in our trespasses and sins.

Which also contributes to this cultural problem. For a man who is spiritually dead has no idea what real life is like. A man who is spiritually dead does exactly what St Paul writes about in our Epistle lesson.

He goes along with the course of this world. Doing whatever the devil tells him to do. Doing whatever everyone else is doing. Living in the passions of his flesh. Carrying out the desires of his sinful body and his sinful mind. It really is a life without value or meaning. To be spiritually dead is to have a life that is as meaningful as a corpse's.

And so, yeah, who cares whether I live or die? Who cares if my unborn child lives or dies? Who cares if anyone lives or dies? As long as I can go with the flow, enjoying whatever my flesh tells me to do, this is as good as life gets.

And, to a degree, that's accurate. I mean, think of the parable that Jesus tells of the rich man and Lazarus. You had good things in your life and you enjoyed them. That's all you get. Now you have to spend the rest of eternity among the eternally dead. I'd be pretty depressed too if that's all my life meant.

But it doesn't. Because even when we were dead in our trespasses, in His mercy, God made us alive. He made us alive with Christ. By grace we have been saved and given the hope of eternal life. Life in which we are raised up and seated in the heavenly places with Jesus Christ. Life in which we receive the immeasurable riches of his grace. We live with hope and joy of what is to come.

And that changes everything in this life too. Your life has value and meaning because you are his workmanship. You are created in Christ Jesus for good works. And God has prepared those good works for you to do that you should walk in them.

Charlotte Elliott thought that because she was an invalid, her life had no value or meaning. But God had good works prepared for her to do. Important good works. Good works that have brought the Gospel to countless lives. She had no idea what God had prepared for her.

The same is true of each of us. No, I'm not saying that you will necessarily write a hymn that will be heard by 210 million people at 417 Billy Graham Crusades. I don't know what good works God has planned for you. Maybe he has some great thing for you to do. Or maybe, like the martyrs of old, the most important thing you can do is to keep the faith in the midst of suffering.

The point is that it's not for us to say whether our lives have value or meaning. If you are alive, then you are walking in the good works God had prepared for you. For you are his workmanship. You are filled with the Spirit he gave you in creation. You are washed in the Flood waters of Holy Baptism that cleanses you of sin. Your heart beats with the lifeblood of Jesus Christ shed for you on the cross. You belong to him... just as you are. Amen.