
What Will Be Written on Your Grave?

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Proper 25A in the Revised Common Lectionary
Deuteronomy 34.1-12
Matthew 22:34-46

During this month of October, in front yards all across America, I have noticed some scary signs and eerie scenes! And I am not referring to all the campaign signs for political candidates! (unless one of you is running for office!)

No, I am referring to the way our greater American culture is preparing for the season of Halloween. All sorts of odd and eerie items have sprouted in our front yards and on our door frames.

I have seen new graves and tombstones. I have seen disembodied hands and heads resting on mail boxes. Down in Coweta County where I grew up, and where I visited yesterday, week, I saw a huge and rather clever black spider made out of bales of hay, hovering over a grave.

I was also in Chicago last week, staying at a hotel about a mile away from the meeting I was attending. Every day, I walked the mile to the meeting, so I could get some sort of exercise. I passed all sorts of Halloween decorations there, too. I saw white gauze all over the bushes. I saw skeletons resting on the porch steps. At one house, I saw yellow crime scene tape, wrapped all around the yard. "Caution!" It said, "Haunted Site. Haunted House."

Yes, even before the stock market began to take its crazy falls and climbs, our culture was decorating for death.

So, before I go any further today, let me remind you -from a Christian point of view-- what all this is about. Most of the yard owners around American may not realize that Halloween is a holiday with solid associations to Christianity. We tend to trick-or-treat, or at least go to parties, on the closest free evening to October 31; but the name of that night is really "All Hallows' Eve," the Eve of All Saints' Day.

November 1 has always been All Saints Day in the Christian Church, when we remember the saints who have died and gone on to glory. It is meant to be a precious day of remembrance and wonder in the church. Of course, other associations have introduced ghosts and ghouls. It is thought that the scary masks we wear on Halloween were originally meant to scare away ghosts that wandered aimlessly around the world on that one night of the year.

At any rate, for Christians, death is a natural part of life. I hope that all of us, during this next week, no matter what our home decorations are like, will take time to remember the holy deceased. We will certainly do that next Sunday here at the Cathedral - All Saints Sunday; and we will certainly do that at a Requiem Eucharist on Monday, November 3, at our 12:15 service. We will also celebrate a Requiem Eucharist and Dinner for Homeless on Monday evening, November 3.

Meanwhile, what is written on all these graves that have appeared in our yards? Today, I want us to look more closely at graves. If you could choose your epitaph, if you could choose, today, what you would like written on your tombstone, what

would it be?

The last verses from the Book of Deuteronomy have always fascinated me. One reason is that, for generations, Christians claimed that Deuteronomy was actually written by Moses, the great prophet and leader of the Hebrews. The first five books of the Bible -Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy"are said to be the Books of Moses.

Well, that fascinated me as a child. If those books were all written by Moses, how in the world was it possible for Moses to describe his own death? That is exactly what these last words in the Book of Deuteronomy do.

"Then, Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab,He was buried in a valley, ,but no one knows his burial place to this day." (Deuteronomy 34:5-6)

But the major reason these last verses of the Torah fascinate me, is because I am a great admirer of Moses himself; and I like to imagine that these verses make up a sort of epitaph for Moses. If Moses has no modern gravestone, with words that live on from generation to generation, then perhaps these last verses of Deuteronomy summarize his entire life.

Listen to what his successors say of Moses: "his sight was unimpaired, and his vigor had not abated. .He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform. .. the Lord knew Moses face to face." (Deuteronomy 34: 7, 11, 10).

The phrase "face to face" was often used of Moses. For most of Hebrew tradition, it was said that no one could see the Lord face to face and live. Even Moses, back in the book of Exodus, is not allowed to see God face to face. But by the time he died, his followers realized that Moses knew God face to face.

"Face to face" means "eye to eye," and Numbers 14:14 even uses that phrase, "eye to eye." Moses and the Lord saw "eye to eye." Numbers 12:8 even uses another phrase, "mouth to mouth." The power of Moses' words was so great that his words were the Lord's words. They knew each other eye to eye, and mouth to mouth.

Who do you have a "face to face" relationship with? With whom do you have an "eye to eye," "mouth to mouth" relationship? Those relationships are important. They shape and form you. They support and guide you.

When you die, people remember you for the relationships you had. Most of the tombstones I have seen always say, "beloved wife, beloved husband, of" or "loving child of," or even father, mother, sister, brother." Moses' epitaph says he knew the Lord "face to face."

I have never seen a tombstone that says, "beat the stock market," or "died with the most toys," or even "went bankrupt three times." Even during these anxious economic times -maybe scary financial times"our relationships are what are critical, not our savings and investment accounts, not even our pension accounts. Our finances are important, but our relationships are what save us; and they will be what people remember us by. And it is our relationship with God that provides our sturdiest support and stability. God wants a "face to face" relationship, an "eye to eye" relationship with each of us, too.

Our Lord, Jesus the Christ, is like Moses in one way. For Jesus does not have a tombstone either. He didn't use his tomb long enough for someone to put an inscription there!

But I think he did leave an epitaph. His epitaph was the way he answered a familiar question one day. It was a question that was asked of almost every rabbi, or teacher of the time. We may even ask it of parents and leaders today.

"Teacher," one of the lawyers asked Jesus, "which commandment of the law is the greatest?" Of all the laws given to humankind (and the Hebrew scriptures count 613 laws delivered to God's people), which are the most critical?

Most of us know how Jesus answered. He answered with the two verses of scripture that summarized his own life. Jesus, too, had a "face to face" relationship with God, an "eye to eye," "mouth to mouth" relationship. Jesus was the very face of God.

And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." These were two of the very things Moses had said, when Moses was delivering the precious law to God's people. One verse is from Deuteronomy 6, the "Shema" of Israel; and the other verse is from Leviticus, chapter 19 - Leviticus is a book that some people don't like to read much!

Jesus cites the books of Moses for his answer. Jesus knows his tradition. And his detractors find it difficult to ask him any more questions after that. Those verses are the last word. They are the summation of Jesus's teachings. They are the epitaph over his life, and his death, and his resurrection!

It does us good to ponder, day by day, those great laws. What does it mean to love God with our "mind," for instance? It means a great deal during an age when our culture thrives on ignorance and shallow analysis. And the question "Who is our neighbor?" means a great deal during an age when cultures want to close themselves off from the rest of the world, in fear and in violence.

I am puzzled, these days, by what people do want to have written on their t-shirts, and on their automobile bumper stickers, and now on their computer home pages, and on their facebook pages! I am puzzled, these days, by what people set up in their yards. Are these the kinds of words we want on our gravestones? Are these words our epitaphs?

Economic anxiety has, at least, had the positive effect of making some of us think about the long term. What are we really supposed to be spending our money on? Where should we be investing for the long term?

The same is true with our anxiety about death. Halloween is a holiday that has fun with the inevitable anxiety about death. We dress it up and laugh at it. But it also has the positive effect of making some of us think seriously about the long term.

What would you like to have written on your grave? What are the words that define you?

I hope that the words that define you are about your relationships - are about the people with whom you have face to face relationships. Our human relationships -with brother and sister, father and mother, friend and stranger -even our relationships with so-called enemies"are what define us. They are how we love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. They are how we love our neighbors as ourselves.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip