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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
All Saints' / Ordinary 32 (Year A-08)

Ecclesiastes 3: 9-15
I Thessalonians 2: 9-13

When Our Work is Done

In the movie *Dead Poet's Society* Robin Williams plays Mr. Keating, an unorthodox English teacher in a very orthodox boy's school. On the first day of class, he calls his students into the hallway and reads the first stanza of a poem by Robert Herrick. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,/Old time is still a-flying/And this same flower that smiles to-day/To-morrow will be dying." Then as an exercise to illustrate the message of the poem he invites his students to gather around a glass case which contains pictures of all the previous year's graduating classes. "I would like you to step forward over here and peruse some of the faces from the past. You've walked past them many times, but I don't think you've really looked at them. They're not that different from you, are they? ... They believe they're destined for great things, just like many of you. Their eyes are full of hope, just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable? Because, you see, gentlemen, those boys are now [gone]."¹ Their legacy and the meaning of the poem, are contained in the Latin phrase *carpe diem*, seize the day. Keating tells his class, "Make your lives extraordinary boys."

It seems to me that All Saints' Day is a lot like this scene. It's an invitation to connect to our past and in so doing reframing our future. On this day in particular we remember not only those who have passed away in the past year and the many, many saints of this congregation, as well as in some more abstract sense, all those who have

¹ Screenplay written by Tom Schulman. Click here to view the scene:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ppqb0t_BOKY.

preceded us in the faith; but we are invited to consider our lives in a more complete way. Think about it: If you knew that today was your last day, how would you live? What would really matter? Would you treat people differently? Would you spend another minute doing something that didn't bring your life meaning and have purpose simply because it provided financial security? How would you want your loved ones to remember you? And the final, and perhaps most important question for us to ask ourselves is, if that is how we would live if we knew this was the last day we had, what's stopping us from seizing the day and living every day we have that way? What is stopping us from making our lives extraordinary? Are we in danger of waiting until it is too late to make from our lives even one iota of what they are capable?

Both of today's scripture lessons touch upon the theme of our lives' work in relation to our faith. Ecclesiastes' message, it seems to me, is not that different from Keating's interpretation of Herrick's poem: seize the day. It is not what we do in life, but what we do with what life gives us. It's about realizing the importance of this moment and squeezing every bit of joy and opportunity out of it. It is about enjoying God's good gifts: eat, drink and be merry Ecclesiastes tells us. Or as Irenaeus reminds us, "the glory of God is a human being fully alive." It's about being able to look back, when our lives are nearly over, and say, that was a life well-lived. But there is more that needs to be said. While Ecclesiastes reminds us that the life of faith is not opposed to the life of joy, Paul's words to the church in Thessalonica remind us that the life of faith considers more than its own good pleasure. It points us to something more, something even greater. It is about the legacy we leave when our work is done.

Miroslav Volf, professor at Yale Divinity School, recently reflected on the up and down life of a friend from his youth, Toma Simic, who had just died at the age of 58, after a long, protracted battle with mental illness. Volf wonders what might have been different if Toma had been somebody that society and others viewed as a person of worth; a somebody and not a nobody. He was somebody when he first met him. He was 22 and training to be Mr. Universe then suddenly he found faith and gave up body building. He began to pour himself into spiritual training and learning. He earned a bachelors degree in theology and began teaching the Bible and the faith to young people who responded to his enthusiasm and dedication.

Many of the young people who responded to Toma, like Volf, ended up in some form of Christian ministry but with doctorates from major institutions. He writes, “We became ministers, professors, administrators of academic institutions, public intellectuals...while he fell into mental illness...In retrospect, the seeds of his future failure were discernable in the over the top character of everything he did... And yet, in a strange way, the seeds of his failure were also the seeds of our success...It is not so much that he failed so that we could succeed. It is rather that through his failure, he succeeded in our successes.”

“Can an arrow forget the bow that set it flying?” he wonders. “Many an arrow does, even though its very flight is a testimony to the bow’s influence...even when I fail to remember how formative Toma was for me, the trajectory of my life is a silent memorial to him. Maybe his was a truly Christian way of being somebody—being the bow for the flight of another.”²

² Full story can be found in the October 21, 2008 issue of *The Christian Century*, p.57. I highly recommend it.

Today we remember and celebrate the bows that have set us flying, and around this table, our Lord's table, we renew our commitment to seize every opportunity life gives us to not only make our own lives extraordinary, but to do so by planting the seeds of opportunity for others, to be the bow for the flight of those whose faces are not yet discernable to us. For you see, the reminder of this day is not just that those who have gone before us in the life of faith should be celebrated, but that you and I have a responsibility to seize our own calling to the communion of saints here and now!

Let us pray: *As we prepare to gather around this table, O God, we give thanks for the bows that have given our lives flight. We also remember that nobody is nobody, because we remember your great love for us that is made known in the way of Jesus. Help us to follow him faithfully, to enjoy what the journey has to offer us, and to seize every opportunity we have to lift up another and share the love you have so generously given to us. Amen.*