

Curmudgeons, Saints, and the Harrowing of Hell

**Homily delivered at the
Memorial Service for Frederick Allen Cone, June 20th, 2009**

Readings: Isaiah 25:6-9 / Psalm 98 / Romans 8:14-19, 34-35, 37-39 / John 11:21-27

**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California**

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I can't say I've ever begun a sermon at a memorial service talking about hell. Don't worry! It's just one of the last discussions I had with Fred about a week before he died -- one he requested, perhaps as part of his preparation.

He wondered if he might be headed somewhere other than God's promised resting place. It was truly a vintage Fred moment. I was unsure whether to take him seriously or not. Fred's dry wit always seemed on the lookout. He knew how much I love to take things seriously -- too seriously at times -- and he adored gently teasing me out of my seriousness by leading me on.

"What would you be taking with you?" I wondered aloud in response to his question. "And would hell want you with what you'd bring?" I asked. He had to smile. A bit of love -- well more than a bit, when it came to Fred.. And what about his sense of humor? One saint reminded us to laugh at the devil, for the keeper of hell itself cannot bear scorn. It seemed to me that Fred did precisely that early and often. Not a welcome quantity for Hades or hell, however we might conceive it.

It recalled to my mind an ancient story of Christianity, which remembers Christ descending into hell between the crucifixion and resurrection in order to bring the Gospel to those ensnared. The result, in our spiritual tradition, is a great revolution in the foundation of all creation, an exodus that dwarfs all. Death is broken. The grip of evil is forever loosed.

The "Harrowing of Hell," Fred remarked, immediately recognizing the story, which brought forth the image of great ominous gates wrought off their hinges, the chains of evil rendered impotent.

Fred and I agreed he was too big for hell, too big even for death. He had to chuckle. So did I. Of course he was. Of course he is, as he lives in Christ, and the Risen Christ lives in him.

Fred's great, incisive mind, and his insatiable love for great music, for justice for all people, his enjoyment of a great argument, great friendships, a great marriage; his heartfelt desire for that long-held vision of "feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow," the destruction of "the shroud that is cast over all peoples" -- well it's why we're all here today, isn't it? A life much too big, too jovial, too full of beauty, life, and adventure to fit into ever-diminishing circle that might best define whatever it is that is the opposite of the expansive generosity of God.

Indeed it was this divine generosity that was at the center of Fred's concern in that last conversation, as I began to learn a great spiritual lesson from him. As so many of you who walked with Fred in the last several weeks of life know, the greatest challenge he faced is one so many of us face as the body and even the mind begin to fail us: a huge challenge for Fred, along with the pain that accompanied it. Could he still be generous as his God called him to be? Could he still give to his beloved in those final hours of weakness?

But my learning from Fred was this: even when all that has made us powerful in this life is slipping away, there is still a remarkable capacity to do the only generous and truly divine things that matter. For Fred, that was remembering his sense of humor (which he did) and keep on loving (which he also did.) All we had to do was watch Fred's face light up when Nancy entered the room or friends came to visit him. To hold his hand with its firm, musician's grasp. To chuckle with him at the minutia, trivia, and even the serious matters of life in those final hours. It was that powerful reminder that physical and mental strength and even freedom from pain are not prerequisites for doing the only thing that might be required of us by God: to love and indeed laugh out of the grace we have received.

We might hesitate for a moment to call Fred a saint. We all knew him to be a curmudgeon at times. Perhaps more often than "at times!" A character he was often, with all the hats he wore – they were many and colorful, as you'll see in the reception!. His sharp intellect suffered no foolishness. His strong opinions always left opposition struggling for ground. He had many edges and misadventures in life, and even in death. And he had startling, though sometimes tongue-in-cheek ambitions. An entire symphony orchestra for his memorial service, for instance, would not have sufficed! But, of course, if we dig into the lives of those we remember as saints, what do we find? Curmudgeons. Faithful, opinionated folk like Fred who brazenly call out truth, even when it is unpopular. Dreamers with unrealistic ambitions. Difficult people for their unswerving loyalty, like Fred's, to justice, accountability, and authenticity. Difficult people who laugh at and question the powers of the world and set out with the Spirit of God to deliberately and unequivocally undercut arrogance. The unreasonable folk who knock, without hesitation, the overly serious and self important. People who recognize that, indeed, creation longs for "the revealing of the children of God." That is, they will be revealed whether we want them to be or not! And one other thing. Most saints hold a sense of humor. To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, they "laugh often and love much." At the risk of wounding his modesty – Nancy might rightly warn me that I'll have to answer to Fred for this at some later point – it seems to me that by these measures, Fred more than qualifies for sainthood!

Above all, Fred allowed himself to be transformed by God's grace, a salvation open to all and revealed in self-offering and resurrection. In the words of our Gospel today, Fred knew intimately the One who utters, "I am the resurrection and the life." It was revealed so magnificently in his marriage to Nancy, in the love for his family and this community, in the affection and devotion to great art that moves, heals, and inspires. We were all touched by what touched Fred – not in spite of him, but through him. And that is a gift he has left with us that will live even longer than memory. Christ reached us all with resurrection and life through Fred's example and witness, and we. . .well, we will never be the same.