FUNERAL SERMON
for Phil May
d. Dec. 5, 2005; pr. Dec. 9, 2005
Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church; Erie, Pennsylvania

Text: Isaiah 25

The prophet Isaiah declares that God, the Lord of hosts, has in store for all people a feast, a rich and sumptuous feast, at which the veil that is cast over every nation shall be destroyed, and death swallowed up forever, and tears wiped away from all faces.

As an ordained pastor of the Church, Phil May presided often at the Eucharistic foretaste of this great and promised feast to come. At this very table Pastor May bid the people of God to lift up their hearts in anticipation of that rich and sumptuous feast that God holds in store for all people. And from the offering of bread and wine placed upon this table, Pastor May pressed into the hands of God's people a foretaste of the bounty that waits for them, waits for us, at the great banquet where tears will be wiped away from all faces and death swallowed up forever.

As an ordained *Lutheran* pastor, Phil May often presided at the Eucharist according to the liturgy of the Lutheran Book of Worship, in which the presiding minister prays, "For as often as we eat of this bread and drink from this cup we proclaim the Lord's death . . . ," quoting the words of St. Paul from the eleventh chapter of First Corinthians. Of course, the quoted words in the Eucharistic prayer continue and conclude with the phrase, "until he comes"; "we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." But let us not rush too quickly from the Lord's death to the Lord's coming. At the Eucharistic table we do indeed anticipate the Lord's coming, but we also proclaim the Lord's death. Every time Pastor May

presided at the Eucharistic table, according to this liturgy in the Lutheran Book of Worship, he led the people of God in proclaiming the Lord's death.

Why exactly *this* proclamation, concerning the Lord's death? The faith of the Church understands that the real host of the Eucharist is the risen Lord, the living Lord, the one who—according to St. Paul in the sixth chapter of Romans—being raised from the dead will never die again. Why should we continue to proclaim the Lord's death now that the Lord has been raised from the dead? Should we not rather proclaim the Lord's resurrection, and put the memory of his death behind us?

The answer to that question must, of course, be *no*—emphatically and firmly and insistently *no*. To understand why the answer to that question must be *no* we have only to consider the grief that fills our hearts on a day such as this, when we have come together for the funeral of this man we have loved. We have only to consider, especially, the grief of his wife Narice and his sons Daniel and Timothy.

Let us make no mistake and let us harbor no illusions about death. Death itself is no illusion; it is a terrible reality. And the reality of death contains no hidden goodness, no hidden consolation. To quote St. Paul once again, this time from the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, death is an enemy. It is a stalker, a thief, a predator, a saboteur. Death attacks us with the ferocity of a mortal foe, whether by stealth or sudden assault. Christians must resist every effort to treat death as something other than an enemy. Because of the grief that follows in the wake of death, Christians are often inclined with many other human beings to seek some sort of consolation from death, some sort of concession, that might dull the pain and diminish the grief. But death itself offers no consolation and no concession. It is always an enemy, and never a friend; it can only take, and never give.

Death, the enemy, has now taken from us a beloved pastor and a brother in Christ. Death, the enemy, has taken from Phil the life he cherished in God's good world, especially the life he cherished as a partner to Narice and a parent to Daniel and Timothy. Death, the enemy, has taken from Narice her helpmeet, and from Dan and Tim their father. Let us not be fools or cowards, who would seek to appease this terrible enemy by pretending it has any good gifts or good intentions for us. Death has nothing good to give us, and intends only our destruction. Death is not our friend.

But the Lord *is*. And that is why we must proclaim the Lord's death. For thus we proclaim that our friend has met our enemy. The one who intends every good thing for us has met the one who seeks to take it all from us. And not only met, but *conquered*. Yet again the words of St. Paul: death no longer has dominion over him. Instead, dominion belongs to the Lord, as the Revelation to St. John assures us, and as Lutheran Christians sing so frequently in their hymn of praise concerning the Lord's feast of victory. It is precisely when we gather for the Eucharistic foretaste of that feast that we rightly proclaim the Lord's death. Were it not for the Lord's death, then Phil—our pastor, our brother, our husband, our father—would now belong to the enemy. But we proclaim the Lord's death because the Lord has taken dominion over that enemy. Christ has gone ahead of Phil to face the enemy; we proclaim the Lord's death in order also to proclaim today that Phil, who belonged to Christ all his life, belongs to Christ even now in his death.

And so shall we continue to proclaim the Lord's death . . . *until he comes*. Pastor May led the people of God in praying those words too at the Eucharistic foretaste of the great and promised feast. We proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*. We anticipate what we cannot yet see: the coming of the Lord who has dominion over death and who takes back from death everything—and everyone—that death takes from us. Until the Lord comes, we must continue to proclaim his

death—because, for the time being, death is the reality we can see, while the coming of Christ is the promise we can only anticipate.

That distinction between what we see and what we anticipate is part of the veil of which Isaiah speaks, the veil that is spread over all nations and cast over all peoples. It is the veil that still separates, for the present age, the Lord's death and the Lord's coming. This is the same veil that now separates us and Phil.

But when the Lord comes, the veil will be destroyed; then death will be swallowed up forever, and the Lord will wipe away all tears from the faces of his people. Then the foretaste will give way to the feast. We have known Phil May as a pastor in our Eucharistic foretaste; then we will know him, we will join him, as a guest at the great and promised feast.

Until then we proclaim the Lord's death. Until the Lord comes, we proclaim the Lord's death. And we confess the mystery of our faith (join me now), saying, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.