

Stenzel Memorial – March 29th, 2025
SMILES FROM HEAVEN

Prayer

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our rock, and our redeemer.

AMEN

Sin

We're gathered here today because of a death. As precious a child of God as she was, Malia's death was due to sin. Death was never part of God's original plan for His creation, but Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and we **ALL** feel the consequences of both their sin and ours. Like Malia, we will grow older, our bodies will wear out, and we will all die. This happens because we live in a fallen and corrupt world. But more significant than our physical death is spiritual death - the loss of relationship with our creator and the prospect of an eternity alone, in pain and torment.

All of us here today are sinners, even our beloved Malia was a sinner. If you think that doesn't apply to you, listen to the words of St. John in his first letter (1 John 1:8-10):

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If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us

God's Perspective

So how did our creator respond to the introduction of sin into His perfect world? Paul puts it succinctly in his second letter to the church in Corinth (2 Cor 5:21):

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This, of course, refers to Jesus, whose person and work we proclaim every week. And this work was foreshadowed in one of today's texts – Isaiah 43:1, where we read:

But now, O Jacob, listen to the Lord who created you. O Israel, the one who formed you says, "Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine.

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Indeed, like Malia, Christ has ransomed you and I, redeemed us, and bought us back at the price of his own suffering and death on the cross. And this wasn't because of anything we did. As verse 25 of the reading from Isaiah indicates, God will blot out our sins for **HIS OWNS SAKE**, and remember them no more, since Christ took those sins upon himself and paid the ultimate penalty for the sins of the whole world.

With that thought in mind, you may be asking yourself "If Jesus paid for the sins of the whole world, why aren't all people saved?"

The key to the answer is in the full reading from the Gospel of John, where in the completion of verse 29 it says

*those who have done GOOD to the resurrection of life, and
those who have done EVIL to the resurrection of judgment.*

So, who has done good? In Mark's gospel (10:18), where we read that, in reply to a compliment from the rich young ruler, Jesus said:

"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

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Since only God **IS** good, and can therefore only **DO** good, and only those that have done good will come out to the resurrection of life, we can say that only those, like Malia, whose life is in Christ, who have heard and believe the promises of Jesus, will be saved and will be raised to life everlasting.

Those who have not believed are condemned because of their unbelief.

Now I have to say this, unbelief comes in a variety of forms. We can easily recognize those forms of unbelief that manifest as either belief in no God at all – atheism - or believe in a false god – a god made not with human hands but with human words and imagination. What is harder to recognize is the unbelief that comes by looking inward and believing that our eternal life is due in any way, shape, or form to what we have done; in relying in any way on our own merit rather than solely on the shed blood and finished work of Jesus.

So, the next question is how to know that we have faith – that we do indeed believe the words and cling to that promise?

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Baptism

Since we know from other parts of the Bible that our hearts, our feelings and thoughts, can deceive us, we look to the external. God works through such external means, and He adopted Malia as His own child when she was baptized into Christ, marked by the sign of the cross, and sealed with the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We also believe that God gives gifts of the Spirit to those whom He calls and I'm confident in saying that Malia received the spiritual gift of hospitality. As it says in her biography, for over sixty years she loved to have houseguests – relatives, friends, and even just friends of friends – as well as to host huge multi-family get-togethers for holiday and special occasions.

One of the great responsibilities of parents is to teach the faith to their children; Malia and Ulrich did this. They made sure their children were Baptized, taught the faith as contained in the Luther's *Small Catechism*, and confirmed in that faith so that it became their own. Because of this shared faith, they, along with all the believers in Christ, can be assured of a blessed reunion with Malia in heaven.

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The Value of a Smile

A colleague of mine who is a dentist has before and after pictures of patients in his office. He prides himself on making people look younger and giving them greater self-confidence through the power of a great smile. Malia, in part because of her early work as a dental assistant, understood the value of smile; I rarely saw her without one, and it brightened the day of those around her. I'm certain that she is smiling now, in the presence of her Lord, knowing that this service hasn't been so much about her, as it has about been Christ and what He did on behalf of not only her, but all who believe and trust in the promises that He made to and for them.

AMEN