

## Sermon for November 10, 2019

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*God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. All are alive to God.*

*Luke 20:38*

Grace to you and peace from the one who is, and the one who was, and the one who is to come.

In the spring of each year, there is a triplet of mysterious days. The church calls this triplet the Triduum. The Triduum is simply a fancy word for three days.

The three mysterious days are Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. These three days are an invitation to set aside our hectic activities and to enter into a deep mystery.

First, on Maundy Thursday, we learn the importance of holding on to love. On Maundy Thursday we hear the words, *Love one another as I have loved you*, and then we learn of the importance of love, including repairing love when the bonds of love are broken. We learn about truth telling, forgiveness, and reconciliation. We learn about community building, by sharing a meal around the table and we learn about serving each other - which is symbolically expressed through a foot washing ritual. In all these ways we learn the art of saying good-bye through ritual, gratitude, appreciation and community building.

Then, on Good Friday, we learn to grieve with God. We stand under the cross and consider the immense suffering of the world; we weep, we make room for sorrow and suffering.

Then, on Holy Saturday, we learn to rest, to live in suspended time, to keep vigil, to be still--still in silence and sorrow--and to allow ourselves to sit with things we cannot understand.

And then, after these three mysterious days, suddenly--with overflowing joy--new life bursts forth on Easter. And, of course, the Easter Day will come, whether or not we have purposefully observed the three mysterious days. But the Easter experience is usually much more powerful when we have first embraced the Triduum.

Now, it so happens that in the fall of each year there is a corresponding set of three days, another Triduum. Those mysterious three days are Halloween, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.

The difference is that in the spring we are invited to contemplate the suffering and death of Christ; and in the fall we are invited to contemplate the suffering and death of our loved ones and our own self. And for many people that is a very difficult subject. Talking about death is the greatest taboo in our society today. Many people just can't bring themselves to consider what it means to live in the face of death.

And yet, death is all around us. In the midst of life we are in death, and death will come one day to each of us. Death is the final and most complete of mysteries. But if we want to be fully alive, then we first have to come to terms with death. And so, the three mysterious days that come around each fall are a great gift to us, a great support in the task becoming a human being fully alive.

The three days have actually occurred 10 days ago on October 31<sup>st</sup>, November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 2<sup>nd</sup>, so I am somewhat late with this sermon, but when I looked at today's readings, I felt compelled to revisit those themes. In particular, I was moved by the beautiful closing words of today's gospel reading: *God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. All are alive to God.* (Luke 20:38)

And so, today I invite you to think with me about death and dying. Perhaps together we can find a way to look at death with the eyes of grace--not as an enemy, but as a friend.

Halloween can set the stage. Dressing up as zombies and ghouls and monsters is a playful way to approach our fears. If we can play with our fears, then our fears have less of a grip on us. Playing with our fear of death is a very Christian thing to do: by making fun of death we are putting death in its place, we acknowledge that death has a place, but it does not have ultimate power.

And then comes All Saints' Day when we honor the dead. Honoring our dead is such an important practice. It is especially important in our days where death has become unmentionable, and where dying often occurs far from home,

For much of human history people died where they lived. But in our times we have banished death to hospitals and nursing homes. We have handed over the care of the dying to the medical professionals who treat dying as a problem to be solved not a process to be lived. But whenever we allow people die where they live, then death is placed into the midst of life. And it teaches us that death is part of life. Life and death belong together. They are sister and brother.

For this reason I am so very glad that this congregation has a memorial terrace. And this memorial terrace is much more than a resting place for the ashes of loved ones. It is much more than a place to honor and remember family members and friends who have died. By having a memorial terrace right beside our worship space, by having it as part of our architecture, a place where we walk every day, where we drink champagne when we have occasions to celebrate, by having this terrace as a vital feature of congregational life, we counteract the modern tendency of banishing death and dying from our midst. In this way the memorial terrace contributes to the spiritual health of the whole congregation.

And then there is the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the three days, All Soul's Day. This day invites us to contemplate: What comes after death? Where do our loved ones go when they have died? Where do we ourselves go? What is the meaning of life when it all ends in death? These questions are at the heart of it all, are they not? And if we can find a grace-filled and positive answer to this central question, then death will lose much of its terror.

And as Christians we do have an answer. It is a very simple answer, it is so simple that most people reject it. The answer is this: In life, in death, in life beyond death we are held in God's loving embrace:

*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.  
If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord;  
so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.  
For to this end Christ died and lived again,  
so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. (Romans 14:7-9)*

In life, in death, in life beyond death we are held in God's love: and God's love never ends:

St. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians:

*Love never fails. Where there are prophecies, they will end; where there are gifts of speaking in many languages, these gifts will end; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13:8-13)*

In life, in death, in life beyond death we are held in God's wide love. And because God's love never ends, our love for each other does not end either. Love is the one thing that death cannot destroy. That is the promise. But we want more than that. We want details of what the next life looks like, and we cannot stand it that there are so few details. And so we make them up.

Sometimes our imagination runs wild: angels sit on clouds and play harps; the dead enter through pearly gates and walk about with golden crowns on their heads and so forth. Sometimes our imagination is too limited, and we think of the next life simply as a continuation of the life that we already know.

In today's gospel story a religious group called Sadducees asks Jesus about the world to come and they come up with a case study: *“Once there were seven brothers; the oldest got married and died without having children. Then the second one married the woman, and then the third. The same thing happened to all seven—they died without having children. Last of all, the woman died. Now, on the day when the dead rise to life, whose wife will she be? All seven of them had married her.”* (Luke 20:29-33) When it comes to the next life, all they can imagine is some variation of the life they already know. A life of marrying and getting married. But the next life might be wildly different from what we know.

Last year my wife and I ate some very delicious loquats. We saved some of the seeds and put them in our backyard. For a long time nothing happened. And then one day a tiny shoot appeared. And of course, this tiny shoot looked nothing like the loquat we put in the ground. The loquat was hard and round and dark shiny brown. But the new shoot was green and soft and tender. And since then this little shoot has kept growing and changing.

And so it will be with our own transformation, the life that we now know will fall away and make room for something brand new and yet unimaginable. Nothing will be like it has before, but the one thing that is still the same is love.

And so our task is simply this: to make our home in this love, to become rooted and established in this love so that we can feel confident about life and death and life beyond death.

And then we need to share this confidence with a world that desperately needs it. All around us are friends, neighbors, co-workers who have lost a loved one, a spouse, a child, a parent, and they have been abandoned in their grief. They have been abandoned by a world that does not want to talk about death. A week after the funeral, no one wants to hear about their grief anymore. And so it is up to people of faith to show up and provide accompaniment as they journey through the land of grief.

Also all around us are people--friends, family members, co-workers neighbors--who might have received a medical diagnoses that forces them to come to terms with their mortality. And there is no one to turn to, because the world refuses to talk about mortality. There is no one who will walk with them in the most important journey of their life. And so, it is up to people of faith to show up.

Which finally also brings me once again to the stewardship theme. We are now into the 4<sup>th</sup> week of our stewardship drive and the theme this year is YOU ARE THE SEED. And here I want to remind you again that stewardship is ultimately not about money--although money is part of it--but stewardship is a way of life and it is about the things we value in life.

This year's stewardship journey invites us to consider how we can be a seed or plant a seed, or nurture a seed that is planted in us.

Today is about the seed of hope: The hope we have as Christians as we face our mortality: first we have to claim this hope for ourselves and become confident of it, and then we have to find a way to communicate this hope to a world that desperately needs a word of hope.

Our life--how we live and how we face our own death--will say much to the world. But there will be times when we have to put our hope in words. I have discovered that most of the time the right words will come to me. My job is not to worry so much about being eloquent. My job is simply to find again and again within myself that place where love lives, the love of God which never ends, and then simply speak from that place.

In this way we can become a witness of God who is not a God of the dead, but of the living, and in whom are things are alive.

Amen.