

## **October 29 – All Saints Sunday**

Sermon: No More Tears

Scripture: Revelation 7: 9-17

All Saints Day is one of the most solemn and yet hopeful days of the Christian year. The juxtaposition of these two ideas creates a tension that leads to hope. Initially All Saints Day is a day of remembrance. We have lit ten candles remembering those who have died who were a part of this faith community since the last time we celebrated this day. Beyond this, many of you lit candles remembering loved ones who have passed through that door we call death. It is a solemn day of mourning. For some of you here the candle you lit is a visual reminder of the raw grief of loss that you are experiencing in your life. That loved one's death has been so recent, tearing apart the fabric of relationships and love, that your loss is a gaping hole in your life and your heart. You are still figuring out how you are going to knit those raw edges together into a new reality, a reality that you would just as soon never have had to deal with. If this is you, know we are all holding you in our prayers during this time of intense grief

For others, the deep pain of loss has been replaced by the sweetness of memories. This doesn't mean that you do not miss your loved one but now, as you recall them, you remember your life journey together and, though there is an ache because of their passing, even more there is a smile, a joy, as you remember. I think about how I have made this journey with many of you. Initially I was called at the time of the death to help you deal with memorial services and to help you process your loss. Sometimes the grief was so great that it seemed to suck the life out of the room. Yet, some months later, I visit with you again and you are smiling as you tell a wonderful story of a time past.

All Saints is a time to remember because memories are a gift that heals the raw edges of grief. In our thoughts, the loved one is still alive. As we figure out how to live going forward without them physically beside us, we still take them along in our hearts and minds, and somehow those memories begin to dry our tears. So, All Saints Day is, first of all, a day of remembrance and a celebration of how those memories help us and encourage us.

All Saints Day is also a day to celebrate their faith and our faith. I love the passage from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14:

<sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won't mourn like others who don't have any hope. <sup>14</sup> Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus.

Yes we grieve our loss but, because of our faith, we also have hope. We have the hope that in faith we will receive eternal life. We have hope that we will see our beloved once again. My mother's health is declining rapidly right now and the best guess of the doctors is that I will be lighting a candle for her next All Saints Day. As her dying approaches, more and more her thoughts turn towards memories of her husband, my father, who died eight years ago. She is anticipating her reunion. This hope, this faith, in the promise of eternal life is sustaining her at this time. Is she sad about things? Of course. No one wants to deal with the limitations that come to one at an advanced age and who is dying. She regrets that she will not be here to see her great grandchildren grow up. But, because of her faith, she can also celebrate that, for all of us, there is a time to live and a time to die. She knows this is her time.

For all of us who have experienced the loss of a loved one, we hold onto the promises of God. For those whose candles we lit today we celebrate that they were people of faith and we will see them again. Whenever I talk like this I am always asked, "What about those who didn't go to church or are of another faith?" For too many centuries, the Christian church believed it had the keys to heaven. We even talk about Peter being the gatekeeper. The implication is that only those who accept Jesus get in. Yet this is not what the Bible says. People want to throw at me the verse, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" as proof that we Christians have total control over heaven. Yes, belief in Jesus leads to salvation. That is our faith. But the verse does not say, "Only if you believe in Jesus will you be saved."

The people Jesus talked to were, for the most part, practicing Jews. Does it mean that because they were not baptized Christians they could not receive the promises of Christ? Or, what about those faithful before Jesus, Abraham, the prophets,

or even John the Baptist? And when Jesus talked to the woman at the well she was a Samaritan with differing beliefs and yet he never said God's love and grace were not for her. He healed the slave of the centurion and celebrated his faith, and so the list goes on. Even correct behavior was not that important for Jesus. Remember the thief who was crucified with him? Jesus tells him that he will be with him in Paradise. Jesus didn't say first acknowledge me to be the Messiah and then you will be saved. The thief wanted Jesus to remember him. That is what we all want, isn't it? We want to be remembered by God and doesn't God remember all of us? The Book of Revelation tries to deal with all of these questions by proclaiming that even after death we have another chance to find forgiveness and life eternal.

What I tell people who have the questions about loved ones is that they are beloved children of God and we can trust them into God's loving care with hope. God will figure out how to respond to people of other faiths and of no faith. God remembers them and loves them. It isn't our job to figure out what happens to them eternally and it certainly isn't our job to keep them out of heaven. We can proclaim our faith, for in it we have a surety of heaven, but can also know God holds all in love.

Finally, All Saints is a time to look forward with rejoicing. Again, from the Book of Revelation we read about a scene from heaven. There is a great multitude from every nation standing before the throne and before the Lamb singing the praises of God. We are promised that when this happens there will be no more hunger or thirst. There will be no more pain. The Lamb will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of the water of life. At this moment the tears will dry up. Why? Not because the person is practicing stoicism and keeping a stiff upper lip which, if you want my opinion, is pretty silly. It is because all of those things that cause us physical and emotional pain and tears are gone. The pain of separation is gone. The fear of want is gone. The limitations of our physical bodies are gone. And so we sing praises and celebrate the joy of being with God. For our loved ones who have gone before us this is what we believe and hope they are experiencing. For us, this is what we look forward to.

One of the realities of life is that we shall die. Sometimes people die way too young, tragically or because of disease, and yes even because of suicide. Their loss is especially hard to process because we think of all the lost possibilities that will never

occur in their lives. The disruption in families is more profound when people die at an early age and so we also mourn for all those who are affected by such tragedies. Others die in the fullness of their years. Yes, we will miss them but it is much easier to release them because they have lived a full life and their passing is not unexpected. Whether we want to admit it, we too will die. Someday loving family members will light a candle for us. When we can embrace the journey of life, celebrating the past, living faithfully today in anticipation of tomorrow we too can face our ending with grace.

In closing let me share a story of one who embraced all of these facets. Vern was a man of faith. He had been a local pastor for a number of years after retirement. When he learned he was dying Vern decided to embrace the journey. First, he researched all of the forms and paperwork that his wife would need to fill out after he died. He filled out insurance papers, death certificates, bank statements, housing deed transfers and all the rest. He put sticky notes indicating where the death date needed to be added and signatures affixed. He didn't tell anyone he was doing this because he didn't want the family to focus on his dying. He just told everyone there was a green folder in the front drawer of his desk and to get that out immediately upon his death. What a gift to the family. Also, he came and visited with me and planned his entire service from music to hymns to poetry shared, as he had been a poet as well, and who should speak. He put a note with it saying they could change anything they wanted but this was a guide. The family was amazed when I showed them the work he had done, again quietly. It was the only time it took less than five minutes to plan a service. And, he wrote a note to his wife and each of his children and grandchildren telling them how much he loved them. All of this was for after his death. In preparation for it: besides the medical and Hospice stuff Vern decided to celebrate. He made sure all of the family gathered a couple of times during his last year. He made it clear that even though the reason was time together before he died it should not be a sad time. He told them stories of his parents and grandparents, they went out to eat, they laughed a lot and most importantly of all, they came to church. He had them with him in worship because he wanted them to know faith is important.

Celebrating the past, deepening our faith and preparing ourselves and loved one for the time that is coming is a good example for all as we give thanks to those beloved for whom we lit a candle this All Saints Day.