



"Unlikely Communion"
Scripture – John 11:17-44
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, November 1, 2020

A few weeks ago, my mom and I were looking through a family photo album when we came upon a picture from Thanksgiving 1987. This snapshot was taken in the years when our extended family would gather in a church basement because no dining room could accommodate all of us. I saw the entire group gathered in front of the Fellowship Hall stage — the stage that, every year, would host a post-pumpkin pie performance of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, featuring every child in the family wearing antlers and red noses. There are no antlers and red noses in this picture ... Just the smiling faces of cousins and second cousins, aunts, uncles, parents and grandparents ... and a few people who — I guess — we're related to, but I'm still not sure how.

As my mom and I looked at the much-younger faces of our extended family, we realized — with some surprise — how many of these beloved folk are gone. We started pointing out faces: She's gone. He's gone. Grandma and Granddad, too. Wow, Bill has been gone for over 20 years. And Susan and Allan died this year ... And, just like that, our trip through the family photo album turned into a roll call of our family's saints — saints who now gather at another table, at a heavenly feast that, I imagine, is far more glorious than Thanksgiving dinner in a church basement.

Some of these people left us well before their time. Others lingered too long. Only one or two passed from this life under "perfect circumstances" — free from suffering and after a long, full life. Even then, those left behind still grieve. We mourn the empty chairs at the holiday table; we mourn the absence of the familiar laugh. Whether it's from a brain tumor that stole his life while his children were young, or from a worn-out heart that just stopped beating, death stings. Death stings.

I cannot remember a time when death's sting has felt sharper than it does this year ...

2020 — The year of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and other black lives cut short by the actions of police officers — a list now longer with the name of Walter Wallace in West Philly.

2020 — The year of hurricanes that materialize with such frequency that we've exhausted the English alphabet.

2020 — The year a virus has claimed almost 230,000 American lives, including some on the roll call of *this* family's saints.

2020 — The year when our collective sense of loss is deep, the year when the roll call of our nation's saints goes on, and on, and on, and on ... This roll call includes names displayed on protest posters. It includes names printed on the front page of the *New York Times*, back when **one** hundred thousand deaths seemed unimaginable. This roll call includes names lifted before God in churches throughout our land, and names spoken aloud by families perusing photo albums. So many names representing so many empty chairs, so many family circles broken. Yes, on this All Saints' Day, we know all too well: Death stings.

This, of course, is no secret. Since the dawn of time, human beings have endured searing loss. In today's reading from the Gospel of John, we meet two sisters ... Mary and Martha are grieving the death of their brother, Lazarus, who fell ill and died while Jesus was somewhere over Jordan. This passage is laden with the sorrow and confusion and anger that so often accompany death, especially death that seems preventable. We hear them in the greetings laced with blame addressed to Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." We hear them in the accusation of those gathered to mourn, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" The grief we witness in this chapter is raw. It's real. It's reminiscent of the grief so many of us have felt before, or may feel on this All Saints' Day.

We often forget about the sisters' sorrow by the time we get to the end of this story. After all, the miracle of Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb overwhelms the grief felt at the grave. For Mary and Martha, death loses its power. And, for all who believe that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, the raising of Lazarus is a sign of things to come ... a sign of the day when another Mary will weep outside another tomb; of a day when another man will cast off his grave clothes; of a day when the One who is the Resurrection and the Life will defeat death once and for all. That, of course, is the moment that gives us confidence even now to stand at the grave and shout: "Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?"

But before that — before we reach the end of this story, before Mary or Martha or anyone else dares to hope in resurrection — there is only sorrow and confusion and anger as a grieving community adds the name "Lazarus" to the roll call of the saints.

Still — even when the shroud of death hangs heavy — we glimpse God's glory. Not *yet* in signs and wonders. Not *yet* in stones rolled away and grave clothes cast aside. But in the simple gift of Jesus sharing our sorrow.

Before he calls Lazarus from the tomb, Jesus calls another. He calls for Mary. When Martha returns home after meeting Jesus on the road, she pulls her sister aside. "Mary," she says, "the Teacher is here and is calling for you." So Mary comes out of the house where she has shrouded herself in sorrow, and she falls at Jesus' feet. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," she cries. And Jesus does not get defensive. He does not say, "Don't worry, I'll fix it." Instead, he does something far less expected, far more healing. He weeps with her. The Incarnate God — the Word-made-Flesh — is so heartbroken at the sight of this woman crumpled at his feet that he weeps too.

It is a sacred moment. A transformative moment. A life-giving moment. Jesus holds space for Mary's sorrow, for her confusion, for her anger. He holds space for her to feel the sharp sting of death until she, like her sister, can place her hope in the Resurrection and the Life. And in this moment, we glimpse the glory of God. It's not as blindingly clear as it will be a few verses later, when Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb and into the embrace of his family. But, when Jesus calls for *Mary*, we glimpse God's glory in the unlikely communion of shared sorrow, of shared tears. We glimpse God's glory in the presence of one who makes bearable the most unbearable grief.

These days it's harder to sense God's presence in the chaos of our days. Unlike Mary, we cannot fall at the feet of the Incarnate God; we cannot hear the Word-made-flesh calling our names. And — as the shroud of death hangs heavy, as we struggle with the loss of so many, of so much — we may find ourselves wondering if the One who is the Resurrection and the Life can hold and heal our present grief.

But, still, in the midst of *our* sorrow and confusion and anger, there are sacred moments. There are moments when it is clear that Christ still calls those who mourn into the divine presence, when it is clear that Christ still finds a way to weep with us.

I have been struck by some of the stories I've read of hospital chaplains caring for patients and their families during this pandemic: A chaplain in Georgia who stands outside rooms on the locked-down COVID ward, holding a cell phone up to a baby monitor so that the blessings of family can carry to loved ones on the other side of doors sealed tight. Or a chaplain in New York who has learned to embrace the way the divine moves through Zoom, as she holds up tablets to facilitate heart-wrenching goodbyes ... Like the last, sacred exchange between a man and his sons. The patient was intubated and going quickly. So the chaplain called the sons on Zoom so they could see their father and tell him he wasn't alone. Then there is the story of a chaplain in North Carolina who talked a nurse through the ritual of anointing the sick because he couldn't be at the bedside due to a lack of Personal Protective Equipment ...

After that patient's mother called — desperate for her son to receive an anointing of oil — the Rev. Steven Chewing tracked down a nurse on the COVID floor. "Well, I'm an atheist," the nurse replied, "but I'm glad to do it." So, from his bedroom at home, Steven recited the liturgy over speakerphone. "May those who, in faith, receive this anointing be made whole," he prayed, his words ringing over the drone of the ventilator. Then he guided the nurse through making the sign of the cross upon the intubated believer's forehead. As soon as the chaplain finished the liturgy, the nurse shouted: "Hey, did you hear that alarm going off? He moved while you were doing the blessing! He hasn't moved since he got here three days ago. I think he heard what you said."¹

In hospital wards, where death threatens to hold sway, these chaplains hold space for sorrow, for confusion, for anger. They hold space for tears and lament, for sacred rituals and benedictory touch; for hopelessness ... and for hope. And, through their ministry, we glimpse the glory of God ... *not* in signs and wonders, *not* in miracles that rarely come. But in the gift of sacred presence. Christ is there — working through Zoom calls and baby monitors and gloved hands that form the sign of the cross; Christ is there in the unlikely communion of shared sorrow, of shared tears. Christ is there, still finding a way to comfort those in the clutches of death ... to make bearable the most unbearable grief.

Perhaps *you* have known the gift of sacred presence in moments when you've felt death's sharp sting. Perhaps you've sensed Christ at work through handwritten notes and heartfelt prayers, through late night phone calls and through friends weeping with you, or in the simple embrace of a community of care.

Yes, in these moments, Christ is there in the unlikely communion of shared sorrow, of shared tears. Christ finds us when loss overwhelms, when fear and despair erode hope. Through the dark, when the dawn seems distant, Christ is there — holding space for our grief until we can confidently place our hope in the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. Christ is there to weep with us, until the day when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, when mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Christ is there. And in this moment, in our midst, Christ is here.

¹ Bryan Mealer, "You're not alone. I am with you': the chaplains tending to those dying from Covid-19," *The Guardian* (May 6, 2020): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/06/coronavirus-covid-19-chaplains-christian>

All Saints Prayer ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of Heaven and earth, the One from whom we come and the One to whom we shall go, we give you thanks for your precious gift of life and for opportunities to build loving bonds with family and friends. On this All Saints Sunday, we pause to focus our thoughts on the saints of our lives and to give thanks for:

The ones who prompted us to pursue a spiritual life...

The ones who taught us the importance of honesty...

The ones who were generous with us and inspired us to nurture a generous spirit...

The ones who loved us even when we were not all that lovable...

The ones who made us laugh...

The ones who brought out the best in us...

The ones who comforted us when life was oppressive and grueling...

The ones who inspired us to help those for whom life is harsh...

The ones who trusted us and by doing so, motivated us to become trustworthy...

The ones who revealed to us the mighty power of forgiveness...

The ones who encouraged us to be determined and never give up...

The ones who helped us discover our purpose...

The ones who challenged us to work for a just cause...

The ones who showed us where to find happiness and true joy...

Everlasting God, we give thanks for those who died during the past year whom we now remember and name:

~ Names of the Westminster saints are read ~

Mighty God, as we remember our loved ones who now dwell with you in your eternal kingdom, we express our gratitude for the special ways they touched our lives and for the part of them that will continue to live on through us.

And now joining our voices as one, we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying,

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”