

**Sermon – November 1, 2020 (All Saints Day)**  
**First Congregational UCC, Eagle River**  
**L. Gail Irwin, Pastor**

- I. We've spent the last several months hearing nonstop about Covid 19:
  - a. about ventilators and quarantining and vaccines.
  - b. The focus has been on "controlling the virus"; because humans hate to be out of control, and this thing has thrown us for a loop.
  - c. But I notice one thing we don't like to talk about much is the fact that, no matter how "in control" we try to be, people do still die.
  - d. We die from many causes, not just Covid 19.
  - e. Of course, we want to avoid getting sick and dying prematurely, and that's why we're all wearing masks.
  - f. But no matter how careful and resourceful we are, none of us will ever outsmart death. Death is a part of life.
- II. Nobody likes to think about death! We want to imagine we are invincible;
  - a. Sometimes when death happens, we try to hide or deny it.
  - b. Sometimes we feel shame about it, as if death is a failure.
  - c. Sometimes we hide our grief as if it's a character flaw.
- III. I've noticed in recent years that funeral rituals are changing;
  - a. Less people go to church and they're less comfortable with funeral traditions
  - b. We're not as likely to gather for vigils in the homes of dying loved ones;
  - c. not as likely to have the body present at church or gravesite
  - d. We're more likely to whisk bodies away quietly, and gather in bars to "roast" our dearly departed as if they have just retired to Florida.
  - e. Since Covid, funerals have become even more heartbreakingly remote, so that in some cases, people cannot even be with their loved ones for a vigil or a funeral.
  - f. A recent funeral in my town was live-streamed from the funeral home; that's better than nothing, but sad to miss the hugs and tears of loved ones!
- IV. The one place we Christians still have to talk about death is All Saints Day.
  - a. The day we admit that we are powerless in the face of our own mortality,
  - b. AND the day we confess that we have a powerful God who will never let go of us and will hold us in some eternal, loving mystery forever. We have nothing to fear in death because wherever we're going, God is already there.
  - c. All Saints is like a collective funeral for all who have died, to remember and celebrate them, and proclaim that they have changed our lives and that they're still alive in our hearts and with God.
  - d. It's a day to proclaim the power of resurrection and just sit in the company of those memories of those wonderful people who were gifts to us from God.
- V. The death of Moses is told about in Deuteronomy 34:
  - a. God leads him up to Mt. Pisgah and shows him "all the land of Judah", the Promised Land. His whole life has been about getting the Israelites to this place.
  - b. Then God announces "You shall not cross over, Moses".

- c. Moses lived 120 years, according to the bible, and ended his life “with vigor and with unimpaired sight”. But he could not live long enough to get to the destination God had for the Israelites. He got as far as he could, then had to let go and let a new generation move forward.
- d. That may seem harsh, but it’s the way mortality works.
- e. We are told the people took time to weep and grieve: 30 days. And the simple words reminding us of Moses’ greatness are uttered. Even though it’s said that no one knows exactly where his grave is, his greatness is what counts.

<sup>10</sup> *Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.*

- VI. I don’t know if your church has honored All Saints Day in the past.
  - a. If you have, this year is like others, with the list of people we remember: those from your membership who died this year.

*Kay Stroud  
Elaine Storzer  
Betsy Simms  
Dorothy Lorch*

- b. You also remember relatives and friends who died; maybe some public figures or world leaders you admired.
- c. But in addition to all the usuals, there are the 200,000 plus individuals in our nation alone (and well over a million around the world) who have died from coronavirus.
  - i. Some have died after working as health care workers to heal others;
  - ii. Some just from going to ordinary jobs where they could not social distance
  - iii. Some just oblivious to the danger while doing ordinary things like visiting family
  - iv. And some have died **not** of Covid, but because of quarantine measures that have cut off their livelihoods and access to work, food and medical care.

- VII. On Fridays on the PBS news hour, they conclude with a few stories of Americans who have died from COVID 19 and I always tune in.
  - a. Maybe because I’ve done so many funerals over the years and had the privilege of telling these life stories, I get some hope and encouragement from hearing that, alongside the tragedy of their deaths is the victory of their love and accomplishments in the world.
  - b. Every life is worth celebrating in some way, no matter how young or old, famous or solitary.

- VIII. Many of us will get Covid 19 in the next year;
  - a. Some will be mildly ill;
  - b. some will get very sick and recover.

- c. Some will die.
- d. The randomness of this disease adds to our sense of injustice about it, and the mystery and guilt of whether we might transmit it to people we love.

IX. But while we do our very best every day to prevent transmission of this disease, Christians also refer to scriptures like Psalm 90 that remind us that we are mortal and that our human lifespan is limited.

*<sup>10</sup> The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.*

- a. Despite hard times, the psalmist prays for compassion from God, and for joy to return so that whatever days we have can be cherished and fruitful.

*<sup>12</sup> So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.*

*<sup>14</sup> Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

That's my prayer too.

- X. There is a lot to grieve these days:
  - a. We grieve for those who have died,
  - b. but also we're grieving for a way of life that we don't know when we will get back "to normal";
  - c. we're grieving a nation that is so divided and we don't know how it will be restored to unity;
  - d. And you at First Church are grieving a hard year of welcoming a new pastor, and losing her.

*How long, O Lord! Have compassion on us!*

- XI. I invite you to make time and space for these griefs and lift them to God;
  - a. write in a journal or talk to a friend about them;
  - b. watch the leaves fall and have a cry if it helps.
  - c. Write a letter to someone who has died
  - d. or take a walk in the cemetery and look at the names of all the good people in your community who have left their legacy of love on the world.

XII. We don't grieve because we're hopeless, but because we have been given precious gifts that we long to keep, but that belong in the arms of God ultimately.

Let's close by listening to a little poem by Rilke:

**Autumn (Rainer Maria Rilke)**

*The leaves fall, fall as if from far away  
Like withered things from gardens deep in sky;  
They fall with gestures of renunciation.  
And through the night, the heavy earth falls too,  
Down from the stars, into the loneliness.  
And we all fall. This hand must fall.  
Look everywhere: it is the lot of all.  
Yet there is one who holds us as we fall,  
Eternally in His hands' tenderness.*