

When Death Comes

November 7, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Text: Revelation 21: 1-6a

All Saints Sunday has always carried a special place in my heart, even before these wondrous puppets came on the scene. Part of it is surely because I can still remember listening to my father preach about its themes of remembrance, love and loss. Believe me, I didn't always listen to what my dad said. I'd often tune out, especially from the pulpit. But All Saints was different, at least when I was in high school and my dad was still serving a church for a time after receiving a terminal cancer diagnosis. During my junior year, my family and most of the church knew he might not make it another year so that All Saints Sunday was a particular standout. At his memorial service 10 months later, which filled the gothic sanctuary of the First Reformed Church of Schenectady, NY, the themes came back to us, for sure enough, we closed the service as we will do today with a rousing version of For All the Saints! What's more, it was at his request. He tipped off the colleague he asked to officiate his service. At the time, it felt a bit like we were singing it to him or trying to sing because most of us were bawling our eyes out. But my dad didn't request it because he wanted us to sing it to him or for him. He didn't need it, not at the point at least! He requested the hymn because he knew it would be good for us, to sing out our grief to its soaring melody. He knew it would be good for us to anchor our sadness in God's abiding love for him and all of us. That's part of why I have and will always love All Saints Sunday, tracing it back now over 30 years.

Part of it, too, is that I've come to love the timing of when it lands every year. I find there's something gentle and just right about observing it in early November. It falls just past all the ghosts and skeletons, the tricks and treats, and Halloween hullabaloo. Our masks have been taken off and put away. There's a shift in the air with the leaves quietly dropping their colorful and welcome reminders of nature's greatest cycle. And here in New England at least, there's an embodied wisdom that says it's time to start preparing our hearths and kettles. Thanksgiving is drawing near. And, indeed we turn today to give thanks for all the saints! Summer is too hot and outside and open for all of this! Winter is too cold and dark! Early November, just right! Here and in many churches, we turn as well to a season of giving and receiving, and of recognizing the abundance of our blessings, with a chance to return and share them, as best as we can - a season for Stewardship of our gifts, blessings and of our relationships, too.

This year, especially, it seems that now is a good and fitting time to recall our blessings and also to honor all we have lost this year. Because of Covid, the numbers alone are staggering. Last year at this time, we lifted up the over 230,000 American lives and 1.2 million worldwide lost to Covid! Today, the total has risen to over 750,000 Americans who have died - that's more than the population of some states! Worldwide, over 5 million lives have been lost. 5 million beloved daughters, sons, siblings, parents, partners friends, each a child of God. Lord, have mercy, we pray, on us and all the departed Saints!

And so, I remain grateful for all Saints Sunday. It invites us to take our masks off, to sing and cry out our grief. More importantly, it invites us to lean into those everlasting arms of God and each other and to muster the spiritual maturity to confront the reality of death. Our culture practically hardwires us to deny and avoid this reality! But God Bless All Saints! For with gentle and warm invitation, we can hold truly tenderly and together these sometimes-overwhelming matters of death and grief. Whether it's those

personal losses recent or long ago that leave us forever wrenched or those wider scales of tragic human loss. Both can create these tectonic shifts in our individual and collective souls and leave us feeling entirely ungrounded.

Yet traditions like All Saints Sunday can help. They may not give us answers to the great mysteries of why we lose the people we love, but they help us to acknowledge that we lose people and that death touches every one of us. By God's infinite grace and abiding love, we can hold the immensity of all of our losses together! All Saints reminds us, and celebrates even, that death is not the end, that God's love is stronger. It tells us, as our scripture from Revelation implies, that God's love, which stretches from Alpha to Omega, from the beginning to the end, is wide enough to hold it all and then some. And that great vastness and imminent depth of God's love, nothing and no one is ever truly lost because we are, all of us, saints past, present, and future, and always held in God's love!

Sure, this requires some imagination. That's where the puppets come in to enliven our faith and hope! And the singing about wanting marchin' in and wanting to be in that number! ! It's where our most powerful symbols are helpful too! This great table of love, where we can feast and commune together, with all the saints! There's room for us all here, including that great of cloud of witnesses, and those angels hovering round! And it's just a foretaste of a heavenly banquet!

Rather than being left only fearful, only grieving, only cold, confused, or alone when death comes, All Saints says to us: why not welcome some imagination, too, and a sense of faithful curiosity and wonder, too!

Enter the brilliance of Mary Oliver. I love how she imagines when death comes! There's a firm sort of gentleness to it. It comes not like any hungry bear, but a hungry bear in autumn! It's not as an icicle nor anything so sharp or quick, but as a slow-moving iceberg between our shoulder blades, coming as if to straighten our back! Like "measles-pox" a phrase I think she made up to capture that broader scale of death. Today we might call it being overcome by the oceanic swells of a pandemic. And she imagines stepping not into some vast cavern of darkness but instead a cottage. There's a sense of intimacy here, like it's time to light a fire and pull out the herbal tea and blankets. As the poem continues, her spirit grows more and more curious and open to the sheer wonder of death. And stepping through the door itself, she comes to see everything as a brotherhood or sisterhood. How marvelous!

And she considers each life a field daisy, and each name a comfortable music in the mouth, tending toward silence! With this line, I can't help but think of how we sometimes sing hymns here, deeply and prayerfully, with thanks to Peter, and how I and maybe you too sometimes sing and end them with eyes closed, and souls fully present to the wonder and gift of it all!

What's more, all of this gentle, warm-hearted curiosity about death somehow turns Mary Oliver back to how she wants to live. No more sighs! No fears! No arguments from her! Just more curiosity and awe and wonder and the gift of radical amazement!

Maybe that's All Saints Sunday's greatest gift. It's an invitation to stand at the threshold of life and death, whenever death comes "full of curiosity and wondering," as Oliver puts it so well. What better way to encounter mystery! What better way to meet each other! What better way to meet God, and to rest in those wide arms of grace!

The puppets get this already! They bring joy to grief, gladness to our sadness, they invite us to dance with the reality of loss and new life and buoy our spirits, because they and we know nothing is ever lost in the awe-inspiring breadth and depth of God's love! So why not join the chorus and sing? Why not let the saints go marching and feasting, all of us together? On this bright November morning, thanks be to God for all Saints Sunday. Thanks be to God for all the precious names we will soon lift up! Thanks be to God for all the Saints who from their labors rest! Amen!

