

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year A, All Soul's Day
October 29th, 2023

You only are immortal, the creator and maker of humankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. For so did you ordain when you created me, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.¹

Without sharing too much about my personal life, I discovered this past year that there is a meaningful difference in one's annual physical exam at age 42, and the one you have at age 43.

At 42, it was business as usual, with flu shots, measuring how tall you are (or how much you have started to shrink), and whether you are drinking enough water (I am not). At 43, apparently you walk in, get scheduled for a flu shot and then are told the top five ways a woman of my age could die, and how to potentially avoid them.

Pointing out the thin line we hold between life and death and on how we encounter both the medical framework for living (by prevention) and dying (by avoidance) was clearly not the conversation my PCP had anticipated during those twenty minutes, and now there are definitely flags on my medical file going forward to note the occupation of this particular patient.

Which is exactly why we bring this conversation to the church on this day.

On the Feast of All Soul's, the Church talks about death. The Church actually speaks about it every Sunday, indeed every time we come together for worship and communion. At the consecration of every Episcopal church, three things are asked of the people caring for the building and community: to create space for worship, to build up the living and to remember the dead. We are, generally, most comfortable talking about the first two- worship and formation. We are happiest lifting up those things which lift *us* up, those, we allow, which give us life and meaning. Death, endings, change, transitions, finalities—those give us more pause. Those cut at the tender places in our hearts, minds, souls and bodies because they render us vulnerable and fallible, two things we—and when I say we, I mean, WE, all of us—find deeply discomfiting, and even worse, inconvenient.

¹ The Commendation from the Book of Common Prayer: <https://bcponline.org/PastoralOffices/BurialIII.html#commendation>

But we, as Christians, are from our baptisms a people who have walked into, and out of, the waters of death. The baptismal rite isn't one of cleansing in our tradition—we aren't cleaning the sin from the child or adult who wishes to be part of the body of Christ (there isn't much sin to be cleaned from a three or four month old anyways). The baptism we hold to is one which asks each of us to go through the waters of death and trust that in God we will come out of them. As we'll hear next Sunday as we welcome two new members of the body of Christ into the Church, "We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit."

We tend to forget about those lines mentioning death when we are staring at chubby baby feet beneath a christening gown and wondering if the child will howl at the presider this time or not.

But the theology is one which we, as the Church, need to claim: we are not promised an escape from death as Christians. We are told that even in death, even in the worst of the worst, even when the waters overwhelm us and we feel that we will drown, even then we have been promised resurrection. Death is not the final word, even if we don't fully understand what that means, whether at our baptisms or as pew-seasoned church people. We pour water on one another affirming that life will end in death, but that isn't the end of the story for those who place their faith in the resurrection. And resurrection isn't an escape hatch or promised land—but rather the hope of new life, attended to, and attested by, the scars of the deaths we have endured.

In essence, in our baptisms, we have walked through death already, surrounded by the community of faith who will love us and accompany one another as companions into a life which will inevitably bring disappointments and detours for each and every one of us—and on those detours, we will know that resurrected life—different life—scarred and beautiful life—awaits us.

If we take that baptism seriously— if we believe that the threat of death is no longer the end, per se, and rather something we haven't tried to avoid, but already plunged headfirst into when the baptism waters touched our foreheads—then our framework for death and what it holds for us, and for those we love, changes.

Let me be clear: baptism or theology or the church, even, as beautiful and wonderful as her people can be—do not assuage grief nor heart- and gut-wrench nor fear of death completely. Those are part and parcel of what it means to love in this dusty human form, made also in the image of God. And just as when we bury our loved ones, we hold the two parts of love—thanksgiving and grief—in one overflowing and often overwhelmed hand. That too, is messy, holy, and ongoing work which never quite reaches a finish line.

Death is messy, and deeply experiential, and hard to articulate cogently because our language will always fail us when we are pointed to the existential question of what it means to live in light of death.

The Gospel of John is one of the first texts to read and translate in a Biblical Greek class because it is a masterclass of tenses and grammatical exercises of the possessive form. In this All Soul's Day gospel reading, Jesus has just received criticism for healing on the sabbath, and this portion of scripture is Jesus' rebuttal to the authorities, not only for the act of healing, but of equating himself with God the Father. In this gospel, the framework of Jesus was not as an elevated human, but of a divine being, present from the creation of the world, who repeatedly illustrates to his followers the false dichotomy they create between life and death. One can be dead, and still be breathing and functioning. And one can be alive, even in death. Eternal life, according to John's gospel, isn't reserved for the grave. Eternal life is not a state of being, just as death is not a static ending, but both are ongoing frameworks of faith: "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life."

I think the writer of John's gospel would have also questioned my absolutely well-intentioned doctor about their notion of what constitutes life and what constitutes death, because we humans fear death so, so much that we often forget to look beyond it.

We fear it so much that our focus is most often on perceived judgment to be laden on us as we stand outside the pearly gates hoping up on hope to be admitted in, than on the promise of eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus. Because, honestly, judgment is easier to understand than a mystery of how life through death actually happens.

Again, we name that mystery in our worship every week. Every time we share bread and wine in the sacrament of the Eucharist, we are asked to remember: to recall the love of Christ to his friends; and to (re)-member—to re-knit, re-connect, the divisions between the living and the dead, both with those we have loved and lost, and to re-knit the divisions between the living and the dead in our own selves; in our own lives. Eternal life is not living forever—not a neverending vinculum of breath and heartbeat-- it is living with the knowledge—and if not knowledge, then faith—and if not faith, then hope-- that death is not the end. Not the end of our story, nor the stories of those we love, nor even the end of the stories of those we do not know, or do not love, and certainly not the end of the one thing which always triumphs over every grave: love.

We remember the dead at our altar today. We re-member them as well. We proclaim that somehow our love and remembrance of them is part of our inheritance of eternal life, promised to us by Jesus. Not by living forever; not by avoiding death; but by claiming as our own birthright bestowed on us in baptism the mystery of unending, ever-enduring, always-abundant love of a God bent on being with us through it all.

Amen.