

November 1, 2009

All Saints' Day

Revelation 21: 1-6a with John 11: 32-44 and Isaiah 25: 6-9

*"Tears"*

Recently there was an article in *The Christian Century* entitled "The good funeral." It was written by Thomas Long, professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. In a nutshell it is Long's contention that we contemporary Christians have strayed significantly from ancient practices that more fully embraced death as a part of life. Perhaps this is so because even though we talk about life's stages and realities, we opt to focus on that which is pleasant. Thus we figuratively stick our heads in the sand much like the ostrich. Thomas Long says, among other things, "Christian death practices no longer express the journey of a saint to be with God." (*The Christian Century*, October 6, 2009, p. 21)

Of course, we don't much think of ourselves in terms of "saints." We leave that title to ones like Mother Teresa and Francis of Assisi and others of their ilk. But today we join their ranks, if only temporarily.

The first sentences of the reflection on today's lectionary passages that appears in a recent issue of *The Christian Century* are: "We can scarcely imagine life without tears. We come into the world crying, and when we are hungry or wet or not held enough – we cry. Tears come unbidden to us when we are moved by beauty or by someone's kindness to us." (Rev. Phyliss Kersten, p. 21)

The commentator's thoughts caused me to think of all that has transpired in our individual and collective lives during the past year. Thus I concluded that as we observe All Saints Day, it seems appropriate, perhaps even necessary, for all of us to ponder the experiences we've shared, the painful as well as the joyful. Frankly, it seems to me that we have known the polar opposites of emotions. There have been moments of pure happiness and there have been days of sheer grief. So it is that I invite each and every person gathered in this sanctuary to allow the portions of God's word shared to reach into the depth of your beings as the Spirit moves, comforting and healing.

Most of us, I think, know what it is the cry until the body is exhausted and tears no longer spill from the eyes. If we're fortunate, we evidently fall into a dreamless sleep only to awaken to the reality that summoned tears in the first place. Then it is that sobbing resumes and may continue intermittingly for hours or even days. At some point numbness sets in and the process of healing slowly begins. However, despite the fact that we regain strength and move on into the future, we never forget the dark night of the soul.

The dark night of the soul often makes it impossible for us to hear any words of comfort let alone absorb them, even if they are words from scripture. And the vain attempts of loved ones, well-meaning as they truly are, just don't cut it. We wish that we could get to the mountain of the Lord where our tears will be wiped away and death will be swallowed up

forever but the journey looms impossible. And look though we may, we just can't see the angel whom God promises will lead us to the banks of the river of the water of life.

The gospel lesson for this day brings us to a graveyard where sisters are grieving the loss of their beloved brother. Tears are flowing freely. When Jesus arrives and observes all that is happening he is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Soon he, too, is in tears. The Rev. Phyllis Kersten writes: "what we see in Jesus in John's Gospel is a reflection of the one Jesus calls Father, Jesus' tears and 'tortured emotions' reflect God's agony and anger and tears 'at the ravaging of humanity by pain and death.'" (Ibid.)

During the year, as noted earlier, as a community we have shared times of great joy. There have been celebrations of engagements and marriages, births and baptisms, milestone birthdays and anniversaries. There have been moments of pride when a son has scored a touch down or been elected to class office, a daughter has been chosen to be on Homecoming Court or received an award for excellence, and several have been tapped for National Honor Society. And so there have been tears of happiness and delight.

Still it seems that life is a balancing act. A few of you are experiencing bittersweet emotions of love and confusion as you face the changes in your aging parents. There has been the disappointment of youth whose dreams have been temporarily dashed. The tragic death of a brilliant young doctor has ravished the hearts of parents and siblings and left an entire community deeply saddened. Dreaded cancer ravages bodies of once vital persons and interrupts the lives of all who love them. Friends and relatives die and, though they may have had long and full lives, we are lonely. Children are held emotionally captive by controlling parents. Separation and divorce shatter the dreams of spouses and children and negate the promise of "until death do we part." Surreptitious gossip and harsh accusations demean and ostracize. Sons and daughters, wives and husbands go off to dangers of war. And so our tears continue to flow.

Though this synopsis of events may strike you as extremely depressing, it embraces the dark valleys through which many of you have traveled or are yet attempting to traverse. If we do not accept the realities, we are unable to move forward. While we look to the new city or world, we are firmly entrenched in the old, the here and now. So, asks Rev. Kersten: "How do we go about living with all kinds of grave clothes still clinging to us?" (Ibid.)

During a time of personal anguish and despair, an acquaintance of mine found some relief to his pain by writing. He said that there had been no plan to do so. Rather he just began writing. One piece that he shared was about going down and down into an abyss. It was only when he hit was so far down that he could go no further that ascent became possible. In that place where darkness seemed to over power there came the faintest trickle of light.

My sisters and brothers, in our grief we support and nurture one another. And in our grief we cling to the words of scripture and we do not fear.

***Then the LORD GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.***

***Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God, and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city...Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it...And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever.***

**On this All Saints Day we reach out and grabbed the hand of the Christ who reminds us again and again of God's promises that have no ending. And we move into the future that God holds before us. This is our trust and God will wipe every single tear from our eyes. Amen.**