FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
Ann Arbor | Michigan

A Way of Life

November 1, 2020
All Saints' Sunday

The Reverend Melissa Anne Rogers, Associate Pastor

Isaiah 25: 1, 6-9
John 11: 32-44

Every All Saints' Sunday, we set apart this holy time to remember the dead. Each first Sunday in November, we call the spirits of our loved ones to draw near to us and commune with us at this sacred table. No matter who they are or how they lived, each one of them are saints — father, daughter, cousin, friend. Each bore the image of God. Whether they finished their race in faith, inspiring us with their life choices — or whether their shortcomings stained their inherent goodness— all are now redeemed. Restored, they are saints in light waiting for a glad reunion with us someday. I sometimes struggle to fully believe the promises of eternal life, but on this day in the life of our church, I will myself to hold that truth more tightly, and claim that gift with joy.

For some, this is a kind day which comforts us in heartbreak. For others, it is a hard day that breaks open our grief. Calling out their names, the ache of loss intensifies, the promise of more loss to come spoken once again.

This All Saints' Sunday is like no other. We sorrow for more than 200,000 souls and carry fear and anticipatory grief for those yet to succumb to Covid — perhaps us. We grieve for our tattered nation, we despair our division, we plead for peace when we ponder the possibility of violence. We mourn for those murdered because of the color of their skin, or where they lived. We grieve for lost businesses and lost income, looters who have so lost their way, just as we sorrow for our criminal justice system's principled police, who, because of corrupt colleagues and broken systems, are demoralized and afraid. We grieve for Ruth Bader Ginsburg and John McCain and John Lewis. To say 2020 has been a tragedy is an understatement. The anesthetizing influence of comedy, the soothing of certain substances, and the peace of long walks is short lived. Even our chancel is tinged with colorful disappointment. Instead of Lilies which trumpet new life, absent from us at Easter when our sanctuary was unsafe even for clergy to gather, mums have taken their place. Who knew that those beautiful white blooms would turn to the rich palate of fall. Reality is setting in that the road until our traditions return to normal is still long. Into just this world on this day in our history, Jesus shows up to grant passage to comfort and communion with grief. On this day, friends, the scripture comes from the Gospel of John, the 11th chapter, verses 32 through 44, the raising of Lazarus. Hear the word of God:

> *When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this*

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man from dying?' Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.' The grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our Lord endures forever.

The shortest verse in all of scripture — Jesus wept. It blew by. Did you hear it? If only our collective grief could be so brief. John, in two words, shows Jesus' human side. Not only does he feel grief, reminding us of his vulnerability, being fully present to those he loved and the relationships that mattered to him. But in mourning, we see his tears. Mourning is the outward expression of grieving, the outer packaging for our inner despair. Letting us know of his grief, and mourning that pain through tears, Jesus gives us permission as his people of faith to feel these things, shedding the stigma that they are signs of weakness. Owning his sadness and seeing his sisters in despair, he is heartbroken. He doesn't push down his grief in pursuit of recovery. His heart tearing in two, embracing all those feelings, he cries, his hydrating tears nourishing him to call forth life. *Lazarus, come out!* In the center of that grief, deep in the clutches, he brings life. From the heavy sorrow of his own heart, joy springs, resurrection is born. Out of deep pain comes abundant, life-restoring love. Does life-restoring love spring from our grief?

In the summer of 2015, Arthur Cave tried LSD, and while in its psychedelic grasp, plunged off a cliff in East Sussex in England. He was just 15, one of the twin sons of the Australian musician Nick Cave. Destroyed by his son's death, it was years before Nick could return to the recording studio with his band, The Bad Seeds, to put together the album, *Ghosteen*, a complex meditation on mortality and our collective grief. Cave is among writers I am drawn to who have found their way beyond a big bout of grief. I hang out in their books and blogs, looking, like Goldilocks, for something just right to alleviate my own agony of loss, wanting to learn their secret recipe for recovery. But over all these years, all I have learned about loss from those who have endured it is that there are no instructions provided, no classic techniques, and no vaccines. Their answers are inevitably too hot or too cold for me. The only way to escape grief, I have learned — is <u>not</u> to love, <u>not</u> to care — <u>not</u> to live. But in Nick Cave's blog, *The Red Hand Files,* I found my perfect porridge, a bowl of good sense. Reflecting on the loss of his beloved child, still in the center of his grief, he brings hope, he calls forth something helpful, healing, hopeful about this sorrow, writing:

"Grief is not something you pass through, as there is no other side. Grief is a way of life, an approach to living. Grief will become an attitude, a belief system, a doctrine — a conscious inhabiting of our vulnerable selves, protected and enriched by the absence of the one we loved and that we lost. Grief is much more than just despair. Grief contains many things — happiness, empathy, commonality, sorrow, fury, joy, forgiveness, combativeness, gratitude, awe, and even a certain peace. Grief is all things reimagined through the ever emerging wounds of the world. It reveals to us that we have no control over events, and as we confront our

powerlessness, we come to see this powerlessness as a kind of spiritual freedom. In time, *there is a way*, not out of grief, but deep within it."

Deep within it. Cave is saying that when our hearts are broken, we remain that way, always carrying grief within us, as a kind of gift. We would do well to embrace it, even perhaps, befriend it. Cave reframed trauma and agony into something that can wing him and others forward in this world. Grief came to Nick uninvited, and moved in, and he is always in dialogue with it.

Doesn't sound like a very welcome houseguest, does it? We associate grief with death, not life, with sadness, not joy, with depression, not energy. Grief as a way of life would be to most of us like living in a prison. Grief as a friend would be the friend we love to hate. For our human nature tells us our goal is to find freedom from the oppression of grief, to see it as a phase of life that we will all eventually come to survive, and to move beyond. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross taught us to intellectualize grief and break it down into stages, a series of feelings to be inhabited, and then integrated or discarded. Other groundbreaking work has contributed to the depth of our understanding of grief's many facets, supporting our idea that grief itself is a phase, or a collection of stages or phases or feelings that come and go but will eventually, by the grace of God, end. We shall recover. Grief is a part of life, not the way of life.

Even Jesus, in this brief story in the Gospel of John, appears to have a bout of grief, a phase of his journey defined by heartbreak. Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha were like family to Jesus. They are totally devastated. Not only did their brother die, but Jesus, who was like a brother to them, when summoned, chose not to come. His reasons were unrelated to his feelings for them and tied up in his call to the cross. Jesus knew that Lazarus was dead before he left for Bethany. His steps back there were heavy with grief for him and his family. It was the mourning that was a phase. Jesus wisely said, "Blessed are those who mourn", for when we express outwardly the inner feelings of grief, people see our pain. Friends come to give us comfort. He didn't say blessed are those who grieve, because there is no "those who do not grieve." There is never a season free of grief. We must live through times when we feel it so profoundly that it is outwardly expressed, its intensity great. Mourning is the phase, grief is life. When Jesus wept, it was his time to mourn. Grief was his life. His grief gives way to Lazarus' new life.

Is our way of life a way of grief? Everyone born has an ending here. We will die. Every relationship we cherish will end in death. For now, we are not yet saints, just saints in the making, given a high calling. God's promise in our baptism it that the Lord will use us and all our talents, abilities, and interests, our whole lives for

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Her glory, including, our grief. We all bear loss and we carry it as courageously as we can. We have a calling to use our grief, like Jesus, to bring life, to take that grief that accompanies us all of our lives and, with the witness of those who have gone before us, do something good. Restore someone. Renew something. Rebuild, rebirth, reaffirm. We find our way only when we accept that grief is a part of life, a way of life. We cannot know joy without sorrow, we cannot cherish life without experiencing loss, we long for the touch of heaven only because we have lived through hell. My mother, from South Carolina, always put salt on her cantaloupe before she ate it. She told me the salt brings out the sweetness. It gives depth to the flavor. And she was right. Grief enables us to taste the sweetness of life, to live into and feel all the wonder of what God has for our abundant life. The salt of our tears brings us the gift of the sweet appreciation for the memories we have made and the life we have left, brings us a deeper hunger for the taste of heaven, that sweet reunion in the life to come. It drives us closer to the One that hears our prayers of anger, anguish, and gratitude all at the same time.

In his remarkable book *Consolations*, the author David Whyte takes us deeper into grief.[1] "Grief colors and inhabits and magnifies each and every day. It is an indication of our sincerity, the beautifully helpless side of love. We use the word only when things have gone wrong, something we want to avoid, to guard against. But grief may be the very essence of being human, of being on the journey from here to there, and coming to care deeply for what we find along the way. Grief is how we mature, as required as breathing, a part and a parcel of every path. There is no real life without the raw revelation of grief. Grief is the hidden DNA of our relationship with life. Because it is inevitable and inescapable, it might be asking us to look for it and make friends with is, to see it as our constant and instructive companion."

To be human, Jesus had to grieve. And so do we. His moment of mourning may be the shortest verse in the bible but it was the long haul of his life on earth to cope and carry grief - giving us the ultimate example of what to do with ours. Carry it, befriend it, harness its power and pathos to bring new life where it is needed.

On this All Saints' Sunday, as you inevitably grieve and momentarily mourn, remember the Jesus who did both. We are like him. We cannot restore life, but we can renew it, we can repair it. He put death to death and brought forth life anew. He will call us out of our own tombs someday. Then, we'll be named saints. While we are still in the making, may our way of life be a life of love, of justice, of mercy, of joy, and yes, even grief.

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[1] I am substituting the word grief where Whyte uses the word "Heartbreak."