

All Saints Sunday (B)
November 7, 2021
Texts: Isaiah 25:6-9
John 11:32-44

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I believe we are connected to each other in mysterious ways that aren't clearly evident to the materialistic mindset of our time. We are connected in ways that we barely know how to talk about. For example, my mom was the youngest of four children in her family, and she had an especially close relationship with her oldest sister, Barbara. They stayed close throughout their lives, even though my family lived in California and my aunt lived in Kansas. My mom shared how one night she dreamed that Barbara came to her. Barbara sat down on the edge of my mom's bed and said, "Pat, I don't feel good." The next morning my mom found out that during the night her sister had a stroke and had died. I don't know how my aunt could communicate with my mom from thousands of miles away, but I can't imagine that was just a coincidence.

Shortly after I began serving as pastor of a congregation in New Mexico, an elderly couple who were members there died. Herb and Ruth had both been in poor health for some time, but I had been enjoying getting to know them. Because they each needed very different kinds of care, they were on different wings of the care center where they lived. When I went to visit, first I'd drop by and see Herb, whose Parkinson's symptoms made conversation very challenging. Then I'd go talk with Ruth, who was so warm and easy to talk to. One afternoon, Herb took an abrupt turn for the worse, and died very suddenly. Within an hour, Ruth passed away too, without even hearing about her husband's passing. It was like she somehow knew that she didn't need to hang around any longer. I don't know if, or how, Herb could tell Ruth it was time to go, but I've known other couples whose bond of love with each other wouldn't let death separate them. I believe that love creates connections between us that are simply beyond everything we know from our day-to-day experiences of life. That sort of connection is, and remains, a mystery.

Today is All Saints Sunday, and our scripture readings invite us to use our imaginations to contemplate this mystery. They invite us to trust that God who is love holds us all in a relationship that is not limited by age or sickness or death, not even by time or space. Through God, we share in a bond that passes all understanding. Our reading from Isaiah asks us to imagine this relationship as a great feast, with the most decadently rich food and the finest wine. God spreads this feast for all people. It is a feast to celebrate God's great victory. As a backdrop to the reading, we should picture the stories told by Israel's neighbors, the Canaanites, stories about Môt, the god of death, who boasted of an insatiable appetite, who would swallow up everyone and everything—peasants and kings, men, women and children, fields, rivers and mountains. Death would devour all. But Isaiah says, "Not all." It is the Lord our God who will swallow up death forever. God will destroy the funeral pall that death stretches over humankind. And God will wipe away our tears, and sorrow will be gone, and instead there will be joy and gladness. It is such a profoundly beautiful vision—the whole world transformed by the power and love of God, whose love is stronger than anything, even stronger than death.

Sadly, we don't live in that world yet. We still grieve for our loved ones who die and leave us. We still feel the hurt and the void that death leaves in our lives. But as people of faith, our lives are not defined by death. Because God has raised Jesus from the dead, we trust that death will not have the last word for us or for those we love. We occupy a strange and wonderful kind of in-between space. Christian faith doesn't insulate us from grief or loss or sorrow, but we do live with hope. God's promise to wipe away every tear and to comfort us in all our sorrows has power to comfort us already, even now. Hope that our loved ones are never lost to God and never forgotten by God—that hope gives us strength and courage to persevere. It gives our hearts peace. And I find that our gospel story for today, about Jesus and Lazarus, offers wisdom for living in this in-between sort of place, where there is grief and pain, but also hope and comfort and peace.

When this story began, Jesus' dear friend Lazarus had fallen ill, and his sisters, Mary and Martha, sent a frantic message asking Jesus to hurry to Bethany. But Jesus was delayed, and Lazarus died. And Mary was more than just sad. When she spoke to Jesus, her words almost sounded accusing: If you had been here, Lazarus would still be alive! I hear both anger and trust in Mary's words. She brings her whole, honest self to Jesus, and she trusts that he cares about her, that he is able to help her. When we go through painful times, perhaps Mary can remind us that God doesn't need or want a show of piety from us. Instead, Mary invites us to be real with God, to be vulnerable and open with God, and to trust God's deep love for us and God's faithfulness for all of God's people.

That's what Jesus shows us too. While making his way to his friend's grave, John tells us that Jesus wept. His feelings were as raw as what we feel, and he didn't need to keep a stiff upper lip or pretend that everything was OK. But while Mary's grief and anger and trust could speak to us about our experience, Jesus' grief reveals something about God. As God's very own self-expression, as the Word who was with God in the beginning, the Word made flesh, Jesus shows us that our Creator shares our sorrows and grieves with us in our grief. God is not above and beyond us, but very much with us, very much committed to us.

Then there's what might be a surprising part of the story. Two different times, John tells us that Jesus was "greatly disturbed in spirit." But maybe it's not so surprising when we recall how, looking at Lazarus' grave, Jesus must have recognized a glimpse of the fate that awaited him in Jerusalem! It's no wonder he felt greatly disturbed in spirit. He was seeing at a reminder of his own death and burial, at this point in the story only a matter of days away. What is remarkable is how Jesus stays true to the end, stands with us to the end, shares this life with us to the very end.

And then, finally Jesus tells the onlookers to take the stone away from the mouth of the tomb, and calls Lazarus to come out. And Lazarus does. With the grave clothes hanging off him, Lazarus shows us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing in life or death, no angels or rulers, nothing in the present and nothing in the future, not height nor depth nor anything else in all of creation can separate us from the love of God. Because God's love is

stronger, God's love perseveres. God's love will spread a feast for all people, and death will be no more.

I believe that God's love is the reliable connection that we can count on to hold us through all of the highs and lows of this life, through the grief and pain and loss, through the joy and sorrow, and finally through even death itself, to gather us into a happy reunion, a victory feast, an eternal embrace. Today, as we light candles for those beautiful saints of God who have gone before us, we not only look back to how they've given us glimpses of God's great love. We also look forward with every bit of imagination we can muster toward the fulfillment of God's great and passionate work of love for us and for all of God's creation. Thanks be to God. Amen.