

All Saints Day (B)
November 4, 2018
Text: John 11:32-44

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I imagine there are a number of families in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburg who have been sitting shiva this this week. Shiva is the Jewish 7-day period of mourning that begins after a funeral service of someone who has died, when their family returns home from the cemetery. It is a time for friends and neighbors to come by to offer their condolences and support. The family that is grieving might have a single burning candle in the house, or wear a torn black ribbon.

If you were to go visit a Jewish friend whose father or mother, brother or sister, spouse or child, had died, as you entered the house, there might be a pitcher of water for washing your hands. Then you would remove your shoes to come in to pay your respects. You might find the family members you came to see sitting on low stools to receive your visit—a symbol of having been brought low by loss and grief. You wouldn't want to talk too much, instead you would try most of all to be a good listener. You might only say, "I'm very sorry. Your brother will be missed by us all." When you leave, if it is someone you know very well, you might say, "May you be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

Sitting shiva is an important, structured way for Jewish families to mourn, to receive comfort and support, to begin to make that terrible adjustment to life without their loved one. In a way, it feels to me that this week has been something like sitting shiva for us as a nation. As a country, this week has been a time for us to grieve the senseless killings at Tree of Life Synagogue, a time to grieve for the pain inflicted on our Jewish brothers and sisters. It feels like we have all been brought low by the gunman's mindless violence and anti-Semitism.

For us as Christians, All Saints Day resonates with this time of grief. We recognize the victims at Tree of Life as God's beloved children, God's holy people, who are held now in the eternal embrace of God's love. And we long and pray for a world transformed and made whole, where this sort of violence and cruelty has no place. We long and pray for a world where there is no more hate, instead only love. We long and pray for a world where the human family is healed, and all of the divisions that cause so much pain now mean nothing any more.

Our gospel story for today puts that longing before us so strongly. As Jesus comes to the tomb of his friend, Lazarus, we recognize the sorrow, the grief, the heartache, the pain of loss too deep for words. We recognize all those feelings as the source that gives such power to our longing. It is out of our pain and sadness that our hearts cry out to God to transform this world and make it whole.

But there is one thing more that this gospel story invites us to see. It calls us to see that God's transforming power for new life is at work now, even in a world that still stinks with the power of death. Because Jesus is the resurrection and the life, this transforming power for new life is positively bursting out of him. When Jesus calls, "Lazarus, come out," Lazarus simply can't stay

dead. The depth of human longing and pain has been met by an even deeper, and far greater, power of divine love to give life and hope and blessing.

Dear people of God, Jesus is the resurrection and the life for us—now in the present, not only in the future. Jesus is the transforming power of God’s love—in our lives now, not only in the life to come. And we participate in that power for new life by embracing everything that belongs to Jesus.

- Jesus is all about forgiveness—and as we embrace Jesus’ way of forgiving those who hurt us, we reject the deathly powers of hate and violence. Instead of holding grudges or getting even, we love our enemies and pray for them.
- Jesus is also all about compassion—and as we embrace Jesus’ way of loving and serving our neighbor, we reject the deathly powers of judgment and contempt, so that we can open our hearts to others. Instead of looking down on anyone, we recognize that we are all loved by God, all children of God.
- Jesus is also all about generosity—and as we embrace Jesus’ way of sharing, we reject the deathly powers of greed and selfishness. Instead of looking only to our own wants and desires, we strive to shake off the fear of not having enough, shake off the illusion that consuming more will make us happy, so that we share the abundant gifts God has showered on us.
- And finally, Jesus is all about community—as we embrace Jesus’ way of welcoming neighbors, we reject the deathly powers of isolation and suspicion, and every form of bigotry and prejudice. Instead of huddling only with people who are just like us, we reach out across social barriers to create connections and a sense of belonging.

In all of these ways, we are participating in the future God is bringing into being—where there are no more tears, no more grief or fear or violence. We participate in that future, even now in a world that is grieving and conflicted, wounded and divided.

It can be challenging, living Jesus’ way of forgiveness and compassion and generosity and community, especially at times like this, when people do such terrible things to each other, when God’s reign feels so very distant from us. But that’s why God gives us flesh-and-blood reminders of how powerful God’s love is. On All Saints Day, we remember and give thanks for those beautiful people who have shown us that a world transformed by love is not impossibly far away. With their lives, they’ve shown us how close God’s healing and renewing power is.

In just a few minutes, during the prayers, you will be invited come forward to light a candle or two. It’s an opportunity to pause and give thanks for those people in whose lives we see and feel and know God’s love made alive in our world. From their lives, we discover strength to live boldly now, to follow Jesus’ way of forgiving enemies, caring compassionately for neighbors, sharing generously as God has blessed us, and reaching out with love to make connections and create community. And as we live Jesus’ way, we see and experience that Jesus is the power of God for making life whole. Thanks be to God. Amen.