

All Saints Sunday November 4, 2018

Grief and the Community of Faith

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The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, was on national television again this past week. He was on the Today Show, a morning news program, because he just published a book of some of his most recent and high-profile sermons. One of the things I admire about our presiding bishop is how he does not use these television appearances to promote his own work, instead he pastors a nation so desperately in need of good news. This time it happened at the start of the interview when one of the people hosting the conversation asked the presiding bishop a question about grief and faith. She commented that the last week had been a very hard one, and by that she was referring to the hate crime shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh that left 11 people dead, wounded 6 more, and caused our nation more collective pain.

The question was not only appropriate for the current news cycle, it is appropriate for the time we all live in, as I am sure I am not the only one who hears how people are sad, suffering, and so very, very afraid. There is grief over jobs lost that aren't coming back, no matter what any politician promises. There are families broken apart. There are lives lost to acts of violence and hate that leave anger and revenge in their wake. I could go on. I'm sure you all can come up with a reason for someone to be grieving, maybe you have one close to your heart.

That is why I was so grateful for the way Michael Curry answered the question of how people of faith grieve. He said first, we grieve honestly, facing our pain instead of trying to avoid it. He said we weep, and we pray, expressing our pain and confusion to God and to each other. And then he said more about the each other part. Community, our presiding bishop said, is an important factor of how people of faith grieve, because we can hold each other up when some of us need that kind of support. He also said we participate in rituals that have sustained us and those who have come before us for centuries. These rituals have proven to create a pathway for the power of God's healing, forgiving, and reconciling love to reach people of all walks of life. These rituals can be special events like funerals, weddings, vigils and are also as common as Sunday morning worship services like the one we are all in the middle of right now.

These rituals are at the core of our tradition and our belief as followers of Jesus. These are rituals that cannot happen in isolation, they need people, not just the celebrant, prayer leaders, acolytes, eucharistic ministers, readers. They need you. In the Episcopal Church worship is not a form of entertainment or spectator event, it is

something we all participate in. We all sing. We all pray. We all listen. We all are present to one another and to God. Worship is one way we can carry each other and at the same time give glory and praise and our whole selves to God.

There is something else rituals do. Something the Presiding Bishop eluded to in his answer to the question of how people of faith grieve, something that we remember on this Sunday as we celebrate All Saints Day. Rituals like this very worship service connect. Connect us to God. Connect us to each other. And, not just this All Saints Day, but every time we worship, connect us to all the saints who have gone before us.

There are lots of sermons on this day that will ask who is a saint and will talk about those heroes of the faith who have days of their own on the Church Year calendars. It is a mistake to believe only Roman Catholics observe saints' days, many Episcopalians observe them and many Episcopal Churches around the world have special worship services honoring saints like Mary, Jesus Mother, Francis of Assisi, Absalom Jones, and other people considered heroes of the faith. There are followers of Jesus all over the world who are inspired by and learn from the lives of these extraordinary people of faith. Today is a day the Church gives us to remember not a just a few outstanding followers of Jesus, but all those who are called saints.

In his letters to Christians in places like Corinth, Paul often called the people he was writing to saints, even though those people were far from perfect. In his letters Paul often chastised the Christians in those communities for being poor stewards, or for fighting amongst themselves, or other sins, yet he always called them saints and said how much he longed to be with them. The letters of Paul remind us you don't have to be perfect or embody an ideal of the Christian faith to be a saint, you just have to be loved by God and be part of the Body of Christ, warts and all.

That is good news. It means saints are not inaccessible pillars of the faith; they are human beings who are and were not that different from us who live what they believe. Who persevered when they failed, when things were scary, disheartening, discouraging, or overwhelming. Which means we are saints, and we can do the same.

Like the folks we find in today's Gospel. At first glance, we might wonder what we are doing with a Gospel reading that contains so much grief, so much weeping, on such a high festival day in the Church Year. But this isn't a Gospel reading that features grief. The center of this Gospel reading is love, not the sappy sentimental love where the person who loves another believes because they love that person that person needs to do whatever it takes to make them happy. That is a self-centered emotion that while called love, it is not in fact love. If you want to know what love is, keep your eye on Jesus in today's Gospel reading.

Jesus who was late to his friend's funeral and confronted by his friend Mary who was in pain. Her statement about Jesus being able to prevent her bother from dying could be an expression of faith or pain or a painful mixture of both. When confronting Jesus, Mary shows us an important truth about love: it is at the heart of grief, and grief is evidence of love. The crowd sees that love in Jesus when we wept, when they said of Jesus, "See how he loved him." Then Jesus performed what in John's Gospel is the last of seven signs that point to who Jesus is, when he called his friend Lazarus out of the cave he had been buried in. This is of course, the prequel to Jesus' own Resurrection, when Jesus was the one dead in a cave and God raised him to new life. While Lazarus will die again, this is the miracle at the center of our All Saints Day celebration because of what it points to then and now.

It shows us that the love of God is so powerful it is not afraid to be with us in the midst of our pain and shares that pain with us because God loves us. God is love and God is the source of life, which is why God weeps with those who weep, and God is more powerful than death, and that matters. It matters in a time when death and loss are used as a form of terror, a way of evoking fear. Whether it is fear of monsters, of aliens, of any unhuman thing from those horror movies that can take life without remorse. Or the fears of those who will take away securities, rights, or life. Right now, there seem to be so many ads spreading fear in hopes that fear will get us to vote a certain way. There are fears of outsiders, however one defines insiders and outsiders. It seems there are those who want us to be afraid and are working hard to make us feel fear.

But that doesn't mean we have to be afraid. Because we have God's love, love that has proved more powerful than anything we fear, even death. Jesus' resurrection shows us death does not have the final say, love does. Which is why we can grieve our losses honestly, and in community. So that together we can walk through grief to the other side. Just like how today's Gospel reading ended with Jesus commanding the people around his newly animated friend to do the work of community: to unbind and free Lazarus. To do what Lazarus could not do for himself at that moment, to show support, to carry him, to show him love.

In his command, Jesus was telling the community they didn't need to be afraid of Lazarus, they should not be afraid to touch him. They were to embrace a person believed to be gone, and then let him live. That is a beautiful way to say what the presiding bishop described in his answer about grief and faith: unbinding each other from the stuff of death: fears, hate, prejudices, anger, isolation and to embrace the freedom to live in the light of the resurrection: by practicing letting go of anger, letting go of fear. That is the work and the gift of the saints that have come before us and is ours to take on as we look to our present and our future as individuals and as a parish.

Our parish community is in the season of stewardship, and too often when prayerfully considering stewardship, and what we can give whether it is prayer, time, skills, or money, it is often tempting to look only to the past and make our decisions based on what has been done. There is nothing wrong with honoring the past. But I want to suggest the saints were people who gave their prayers, their time, their money to the efforts of the church not just for what the church did, but so that the Church could grow and continue to follow Jesus, to be a place of worship, of community, and to be brave and go out into the neighborhoods and cities and world to bring the much needed Good News of the power of God's love to so many people who are so hungry to hear it. That isn't just work for the Presiding Bishop to do alone, it is work for all the saints, that means you and me side by side just like those who have shown us the way.