

“All Saints and Souls, Each One of Us”

By Dorothy Whiston
New Song Episcopal Church
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All Saints Day, Year B

Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1-6a
John 11:32-44

It's never seemed very Christ-like to me that the church has a major feast day for All Saints followed by a lesser celebration for All Souls. I just don't see Jesus elevating one group of people over another like that. And especially not a group selected at least in part through ecclesial maneuverings. So this will be as much an All Souls as an All Saints sermon.

What these two feast days have in common, of course, is our enfleshed mortality and our spiritual immortality. As Christians, our idea of immortality includes the resurrection of the body at the end of time, which we'll get to in a bit. But let's start by exploring death a bit more.

The scripture texts underlying my sermon today are from our reading in Isaiah: “The Lord God will wipe the tears from all faces.” From Revelation: “Death will be no more.” And from John: “Unbind him, and let him go.”

The Rule of St. Benedict instructs monks to “keep death ever before your eyes,” which led to a centuries-long tradition of keeping a skull on their writing desks. Surely, this is one way to keep mindful of the Way of the Cross, which, let's face it, is a conscious journey toward death. It's meant to be filled with daily dyings-to-self. And I believe it's also meant to prepare us to freely relinquish our earthly lives when either our worn out bodies or the death-dealing sin of the world tell us the gig's up. How we see death has everything to do with how we live life.

The medieval mystic Meister Eckhart said any talk of God that doesn't comfort you is a lie. And I would maintain the same is true about death. In his new book, Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle tells the story of his elderly mother's death. He says she approached it excitedly, like one might approach learning to skydive. He wrote, “At exactly noon, she opened her eyes, lifted her head some, let out a glorious, wondrous gasp...and she left us. And no one in earshot of the sound would ever fear death again.”

This from someone who's not the least bit naive about how ugly death can be. Boyle is the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, the largest gang and prison reentry program in the world. He's buried nearly 250 active and retired gang members over the years, most of whom died at a young age by one kind of violence or another. And still, for him, the deepest truth of death is a gasp of wonder.

About fifteen years ago I was gifted with what I've come to call a front-porch-of-death experience. Even if not a real near-death encounter, it forever changed my experience of death, and so of life. I'd had bunion surgery and unbeknownst to everyone developed a large blood clot under my foot-to-knee cast. The clot eventually caused a massive pulmonary embolism the doctors said was amazing I survived.

It's a long story why I didn't go to the ER until the next day, but that's how it played out. After getting settled in my hospital room that evening I finally called our daughter Liz in New York to let her know what was going on. Having experienced her own and witnessed John's

frightening health crises at a young age, she was having none of my confident assurances I would be just fine.

At the end of our conversation I promised that before I went to sleep, I'd spend time in prayer to see what I could discover about the possibility I was on my death bed, as she so deeply feared. I promised I would let her know immediately if my intuition, my body, or the many monitors I was hooked to seemed to indicate I was in imminent danger.

As I began to pray, it came to me that some people in that hospital would surely die that night, probably including some who were ostensibly in less danger than I was. And that others of us would live. It was clear to me the fullness of God's love and even life were flowing through each one of us, no matter which group we were in.

I felt sure every one of us was completely cared for and safe, even if we were dying, so asking God to save or spare me or even heal me seemed somehow redundant. I was convinced God was doing all that for all of us, albeit in the context of mortal bodies and other mysteries I didn't fully understand. Mysteries that included the possibility of death right in the midst of God's safe-keeping.

Then I started to think maybe I was just clinging to blissful ignorance about my impending death. So I began to explore more deeply how I felt about dying then and there. To my surprise, I discovered I was quite fine with it. In the past when I'd tried to encounter my death head-on, I'd found I was pretty much at peace with the idea of being dead, was a little concerned about suffering on the way, and had real grief at leaving this world before I felt finished with things. And I was absolutely overwhelmed with sadness at the thought of leaving my family and friends.

This time, however, I was positively intrigued by what state I would enter into after this life, felt confident I could handle any suffering, and had absolutely no grief about leaving things behind or undone. I was surprised enough to find such easy acceptance I began to wonder if I was unknowingly depressed or not really wanting to go on living for some reason. On closer self-examination I found I absolutely wanted to continue living on this earth. But was also completely okay with not getting what I wanted and letting my life go. An odd sort of paradox, I thought.

When I went on to contemplate the grief of leaving my loved ones, I found death no longer had the sting it once had. I saw that although I'd feel very sad while saying good-bye to people, at the moment of death I'd be completely freed from this sorrow. I simply wouldn't experience the kind of separation I expected to. Rather, I'd find myself somehow even more fully in communion with the people I loved. My only sorrow would be in knowing they likely wouldn't be able to experience the same sense of union with me that I did with them. This sorrow was more compassion for those left behind than the tremendous grief over missing people I'd felt before.

Knowing so surly I'd be freed from earthly sorrows at the time of death was very liberating, even exhilarating. And then, moments later, it gave rise to a visceral experience of absolutely all the sorrows and other life burdens I carried being fully released. Just gone. Very profound and wonderful, to say the least!

Over the next day or so I realized not only was God loving and giving life to all of us without regard to our biological state, God was absolutely delighting in each of us just as we were. I knew if I spent the rest of my life lying on my back staring blankly at the ceiling, which

I'd been doing a lot of, God would delight in me just as much as She would if I were doing something useful. And that this was true whether I was ill or well. What mattered to God was that I was doing what I, with all my quirks and limitations, felt most deeply called to do.

It was my being rather than my doing that God cherished. Which, of course, made all my strivings to be good or useful or somehow more acceptable seem like so much fluff in the wind. While I knew God wanted me to do no harm, it was clear the best way to ensure that was simply to accept myself and life as it came. Then I would be fully present and so able to respond in love to whatever happened.

In the wake of all these realizations, I gradually surrendered more and more into just being who and how I was in the moment. So much so, that over the next few days all my inner voices -- my shoulda, coulda, wouldas, my fantasies of the future and musings on the past, my constant analysis and judgment of every little thing -- they all fell silent. I could still think about something if I chose to, but otherwise, no thoughts. Just spacious, sweet silence. I didn't fully perceive this utter stillness at first, but sort of wondered what was so very different as the time went by.

Then almost imperceptibly time itself, and the occasional anxiety associated with it, also faded away. While I still understood the concept of time, it simply ceased to matter in any way. And I realized how much my endless internal chatter was connected to my involvement with chronological time. As the bed-confined days went on people kept apologizing for being late with this or that, and they began to insist I must be getting bored and restless. But I could honestly say I was perfectly content. I was equally at peace visiting with people, reading, or just staring into space, and found them all fully engaging.

Here, in case you're wondering, I'll note I was on no drugs other than blood thinners during all this. I guess contemplating my death simply awakened me to God's grace, though it was all quite matter of fact. More "just there" than a spiritual high. Life simply went on, only differently. And while I was a little wistful when my awareness began to get more cluttered a few weeks later this, too, seemed quite all right. Thankfully, I can still dip into the quiet, peaceful state that underlies my usual busy awareness -- when I remember that deeper reality is always there.

I think what I got a glimpse of back then is what we usually call heaven. Theologian N.T. Wright says, "Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden dimension of our ordinary life -- God's dimension, if you like." He also says that when we think about going to heaven after we die, where we're really headed is into a temporary, peaceful state of rest in God until our far more momentous resurrection in the fullness of time. Then, he says, we will be "bodily raised into the transformed, glorious likeness of Jesus Christ." He calls this life *after* life after death. And I must say, I'm rather looking forward to discovering what that's all about!

Thanks be to God! And may you know this day and always the blessings of your special place in the Communion of All Saints and Souls, sinners and saints that we all are.