

All Saints' Sunday

Hebrews 12:1-2

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

"The Stories That Surround Us"

When the story of us ends, traditionally, we have found our way to a cemetery or a graveyard, like the one we are gathered in this morning, for a burial. Some of you have your plots here, and a few already have your gravestones in place with your names etched on them.

I know I have shared these words of the poet and funeral director, Thomas Lynch, with you before, but they are always worth repeating. In his poem, 'At The Opening Of The Oak Grove Cemetery Bridge,' he writes:

"And on the other side, the granite rows
of Johnsons, Jacksons, Ruggles, Wilsons, Smiths—
the common names we have in common with
this place, this river and these winter oaks.

And have, likewise in common, our own ends
that bristle in us when we cross this bridge—
the cancer or the cardiac arrest
or lapse of caution that will do us in.
Among these stones we find the binding thread:
old wars, old families, whole families killed by flues,
a century and then some of our dead
this bridge restores our easy access to.
A river is a decent distance kept.
A graveyard is an old agreement made
between the living and the living who have died
that says we keep their names and dates alive.
This bridge connects our daily lives to them
and makes them, once our neighbors, neighbors once again."

Many of you have family members and friends who are buried here, and in time, will lie beside them, taking your eternal bodily rest. Others of you may have your ashes or your loved ones' ashes scattered in our new scatter garden.

As your pastor, I have gathered with you in this cemetery to bury our loved ones, offering the sacred words of hope that nothing in life or in death will separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus.

While we always gather here on Easter morning, regardless of the weather, to witness to the promise that Life always answers death, it felt right to do so on All Saints' Sunday as well.

I like how Jan Richardson, speaks about the meaning of this time and why our gathering here is important. She writes, **"as we move through Halloween, All Saints, and All Souls, I am thinking especially of those who have lost beloved ones since this time last year. And I am thinking always of those who have carried grief for a long time. I am grateful that the sacred calendar provides these days to do what so many of us do throughout the year: to remember beloved ones who are no longer here but who somehow journey with us still.**

In these days, as we grieve and celebrate our beloved dead, may we know how they endure with us, holding our hearts and encompassing us with a fierce and stubborn love that persists across time and distance. May that love help light our way in the life that is continuing to unfold for us."

The writer of Hebrews says of our beloved dead we have gathered to remember this day, those who are buried here in Lake Ripley Cemetery or in another cemetery or in our hearts, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."

So great a cloud of witnesses, those who we have loved in life, and continue to love even in their deaths.

When Jan Richardson's husband, Gary, who was a musician and a storyteller, died unexpectedly following surgery, she said in the midst of her grief, this thought came to her, **"Sometime after Gary's death, the thought came to me: Now he is all story. Story is what remains of my beloved: the stories he told in song and spoken word; the stories by which he invited us to enter into the story of God; and the stories we tell now of who Gary was in this life."**

Now he is all story, and story is what remains of my beloved.

I think Jan Richardson offers something for us to reflect on this All Saints' Day. In the end of any of us, and all of us, story is what will remain.

The things people have left behind hold value and meaning, but they are just things, and will in time wear out. The same with homes and buildings, like the first church that once stood here and some of the old gravestones that once stood here.

Those are not the legacy our loved ones have left us. It is their story of love, which is that great cloud of witness that surrounds us.

And in time, when we come to our end, and story is all that remains of each of us, may we rest in promise that our stories will flow into the eternal story of the Love of God that knows no end.

Amen.