

ALL WHO HAVE THIS HOPE

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

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TEXT: 1 JOHN 3:1-3

Funeral director turned best-selling author Thomas Lynch has commented that our society's avoidance of death, our desire to sweep it under the carpet and dwell on cheerful things, is an impediment to our full appreciation of life. What is "All Saints' Day," he wonders, if not time set aside to "broker peace between the living and the dead, to acknowledge that the gone are not forgotten?" Many of my Asian friends take as their sworn duty an at-least annual pilgrimage to the graves of ancestors known and unknown. In Latino culture, graves are decorated with candles, fresh flowers, and symbols of the dead person's life. Picnics are held among the old stones, as families gather to pray and remember. He notes that public ceremonies or rituals for examining death are decreasing, and that even funerals and memorial services are marked by "the subtle enforcement of an emotional code that approves the good laugh but not the good cry." [*Thomas Lynch, A Date with the Departed, op ed piece in The New York Times, 1 November 2008*] As an antidote to this, Lynch suggests wandering through a cemetery, noting the tombstones, the epitaphs, the birth and death dates, to find in those reflections of death some clues to the meaning of life.

The Church has advocated the same throughout two millennia, which is why on the Sunday closest to All Saints' Day, we read the names of Fairmount members who have died in the past year. Of course there is value in remembering these particular beloved persons. But I also believe this commemoration helps us cut through the denial of death to which we might succumb in order to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return, and discover in that solemn reality the truth that sets us free.

There are 22 candles representing beloved individuals worthy of remembrance and gratitude. Among them are men and women who served Christ through this church with distinction. . . a former clerk of Session. . . a woman confirmed on Easter in 1927 who never missed an Easter service after that -or very many Sunday services. . . a tireless fighter for peacemaking and justice. . . deacons and elders and trustees and Guild leaders who cared about making a difference. There are people who loved Cleveland and as attorneys and bankers and business men and women and volunteers worked for its health and vibrancy. One was a published author. Another raised six children. One struggled valiantly against Alzheimer's which robbed us of an uncommon wisdom and keen wit. All had dreams and fears and sorrows and joys. There are some we knew well and some whose advanced years outlasted most of their peers. One took his own life, when the weariness of the struggle caused him to forget the arms—divine and human--reaching out to him. The calculus of loss is without measure. We remember, and we grieve.

We grieve, wrote the apostle Paul, but “we do not grieve as those who have no hope.” Christian faith has never denied the pain of loss or turned a blind eye from the tsunami of sorrow that threatens our carefully-constructed lives. Grief is real, grief is normal as the consequence of losing those whom we love. Psychologists speak of “grief *work*” -and so it is. We grieve but we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Instead, amid scenes of desolation and devastation, Christian faith offers another picture, another scenario that is as true as death is true. We find many expressions of this picture throughout Scripture, but our morning text offers a particularly significant affirmation. To a church torn by division, struggling against persecution and an uncertain future, the author poses a counter argument based on the single reality that God has so loved them and called them family. A reading from the first letter of John, in the third chapter at the first verse. Listen for God’s Word to the Church and to you this day: [I John 3:1-3]

Arguably the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr described this ambivalence using the metaphor of a sailor who climbs the mast of his ship and looks out on limitless vistas. The view is grand and inspiring. But then, from the mast, he looks down and sees the sea roaring beneath his tiny ship. Just below us is finitude. We know that no matter how high we climb, or how far our vision, we will die. Human life is both rich with possibility and bounded by the certainty of death.

How can we grieve, but not as those without hope? And how can we live joyfully, trustingly, triumphantly without denying that someday our lives—and the lives of our beloved-- will end?

For starters, let's acknowledge there are no easy answers to those questions, and that in the questions themselves we begin to find insight. Cutting off the cries and questions of the grieving heart both dishonors the grief and short-circuits the grieving process. Better to sit with the griever in silence. Better to take a chicken casserole or lemon pie to their home. Better to remember to call to check in six months or a year or two years later. There is a story from the Sufi tradition about a man who cried, "Allah! Allah!" until his lips became sweet with the sound. A skeptic who heard him said, "Well, I have heard you calling out, but where is the answer to your prayer? Have you ever gotten a response?" The man had no answer to that. Sadly, he abandoned his prayers and went to sleep. In his dreams he saw the prophet, walking toward him. "Why did you stop praising?" the prophet asked. "Because I never heard anything back," the man said. "This longing you voice *is* the return message," the wise man told him. "The grief you cry out from draws you toward union. Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup." [quoted in Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent*, pp. 78-9]

We grieve and find that it opens a space to receive what alone will assuage it. We come into the presence of transcendent grief, the crucified One who cried out on his cross for an

answer and received none. Yet that experience of divine abandonment became the way through which the finality of the death was destroyed. The grave, the columbarium niche, does not have the last word. Just as God raised Jesus from the dead, we shall be raised as well. Faith holds our hand through grief and invites us to see more. To dip our cup into the spring of life and taste that day when God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

It's a compelling vision, but as one of you asked me this week, what hope does it provide a grieving widow, parents who ache with the loss of their child every day, the one whose heart followed his dead friend's into the grave? Perhaps only this: you can see through tears what you cannot see otherwise. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted by a glimpse of God's new day, when every tear will be wiped from their eyes and death will be no more. The grieving become our teachers, for they show us two true things: first, that hope is not located in heaven. It is this world that God gave everything to redeem. God's home is with people, the living and those who have died. When we grieve, we draw closer to the God who grieves over the death that is in the world and is working even now to overcome it. Second, they show us that in the hope of resurrection, we are free to do more with our lives than merely strive to protect them. We can give them. We are called to love the world, to make peace, to do justice, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves [*Teaching Moments* article by John Buchanan, editor, *The Christian Century*, September 20, 2005]. We can give the very best of who we are without fear because Christ has put an end to the reign of death. We are free to live, really live, each day, with purpose and thanksgiving.

Every time we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we recall that it is also a sign of our "communion" with God and with one another, and with all the saints, living and departed. What better way to remember the dead than here in this meal where Christ's death is memorialized. *Do this in remembrance*

of me. Do this in remembrance of fathers and mothers and husbands and wives and sons and daughters and friends and beloved ones. Do this in remembrance that Christ's death made a way for death itself to die. But do this most of all in remembrance that God is with us, and with our dead, and that keeps us together, until we meet again on that day when death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

There are 22 candles representing members who have died since this time last year. But there is a twenty-third candle, one that simply represents all those others we have loved and lost. Remember them too, and the particular gifts and graces with which they were endowed. Don't be afraid for them, or for yourself. Friends, what we will be has not yet been revealed, but what we do know is this: we are God's children, today and forever. We have this hope, which will not disappoint us.

GLORY BE TO THE FATHER AND TO THE SON AND TO THE HOLY SPIRIT. AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING, IS NOW AND EVER SHALL BE, WORLD WITHOUT END. AMEN.