

“The Assurance of Things Hoped For”

Hebrews 11:1-3, 12:1-2; Revelation 21:1-5, 22:1-2 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 3, 2024
All Saints Memorial Sunday

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might hold fast to the heart of Christ and live with full compassion for all. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

It is good that at least once a year, we turn our thoughts, our attention, and our conversation to death. It is good because one of the things we are here to teach each other is how to die well. Death is the one universal, the thing we all have in common when everything else seems to draw lines between us. It is good because things we shy away from talking about accrue unwarranted power over us, creating fear and trepidation where instead we could be cultivating curiosity and hope. It is good, perhaps most especially, because of what death can teach us about life and living.

We had a good and wide-ranging conversation about death on Friday night at our Supper of Substance. For those of you who weren't able to join us, I will include the discussion questions we used in this afternoon's email. Plus, I handed out a "homework assignment" that I'll put in there too. It's basically a way to think through your desires for your memorial service and any other details you would like your church to make sure get taken care of when you die. You can fill it out by hand or electronically and then return it to me, and we'll make sure it's kept in a file for the appropriate moment. As one person noted, none of us is going to be the exception to this rule, so it's good to make plans and share them.

As we went around the circle toward the end of the evening, some folks shared their thoughts about how thinking about death influenced how we think about living, or more directly, how we go about living. And it's here that I think we can begin to see the lessons death can give us for life. Living with an awareness that all this is temporary compels us to live with intention and gratitude. It's not that we will never take a nap again, for fear of taking our time for granted, but rather that we can nap with full appreciation of the preciousness of rest and what a blessing it is for our bodies and souls. But the intention and gratitude that can grow from a healthy sense of our own mortality can also empower us to take risks, to do the thing we've always wanted to do but somehow haven't made time for yet, to live more adventurously, more abundantly, more generously.

Our scripture reading from Hebrews today speaks to us of the "great cloud of witnesses." The writer has just told the story of numerous saints of biblical times – Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Rahab, and Gideon – those who followed God's leading even when it wasn't clear how that would turn out. Today, we tell similar stories in our hearts, as we remember our ancestors, those whose lives testify to how we got here and who we are. Once again, we discover that, just as a memorial service is for the living more than for the dead, that this All Saints Day is for us. We don't lift up the names of our loved ones to reassure them they are not forgotten, but rather to remind ourselves what they taught us, to remind ourselves what it means to be faithful, to remind ourselves who and whose we are.

They are abiding with God, where death is no more, where mourning and crying and pain are no more. We don't need to worry about them. But remembering them, calling them forth in our minds and hearts – whether their lessons were purely positive or cautionary tales – helps us learn more about how to live. Taking a moment to assess what baggage our lineage may have burdened us with can only happen if we open our thoughts to memory. The writer of Hebrews encourages us to lay aside that weight before we begin to run the race. We can learn the lessons, and we can set down the weight of the past that would otherwise make it harder to keep going forward faithfully. Like Jesus, we can disregard the shame in order to embrace the joy.

Perhaps the most important lessons death can teach us is not just about life but about faith. The writer of Hebrews calls us to understand that “what is seen was made from things that are not visible.” Faith, they say, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” At first glance, that may seem like a hard sell. “Seeing is believing,” our culture insists. “Show me the money!” But stop a moment and consider your own life, and even the ways your life has been impacted by death. How much of that impact, how much of what shapes your life is something visible? Is the gratitude or intention with which we want to live our lives something that can be seen? Are the memories of loved ones who have shaped who we are visible? Our very existence is testimony to the power of things that aren't visible to create our world.

In First Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul tells us all about love. Love is patient and kind; it is not arrogant or boastful or rude. Love bears all things, believes all things,

endures all things. But perhaps the most important thing Paul says about love in that chapter is that love never ends. And as we remember our loved ones who have died today, let me testify that our grief is proof of this vital truth. Our grief shows us, from the inside out, that love never ends. That does not mean that we must wallow in grief and never let our relationship with a particular grief evolve, in order to prove the eternal nature of our love. Love itself changes, so of course grief will also shift, ebbing and flowing as life goes on. But the love never departs, even as our life grows around it.

This is perhaps the truest way in which we are made in the image of God. God is love. Love never ends. Our capacity to love someone, unlike many other things about us, is not changed or taken away by their death. We might even dare to believe that our capacity to love someone cannot be taken away by our own death either. I would guess that many of you have had experiences that clarified for you that someone who loved you in life continues to do so from beyond death.

Love never ends. These are words that, as the angel said in Revelation, are “trustworthy and true.” We should write them down. We should say them aloud. We should teach them to our children. Love never ends. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. But love never ends. The Love we cannot see formed us in its image. The Love we cannot see continues to sustain our world, despite the great brokenness of it all. The Love we cannot see calls us to live with gratitude and intention, with faithfulness and hope, for the healing of the nations. Hallelujah and Amen.