



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

KEEPERS OF MEMORY

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November 1, 2020, All Saints' Day

Text: Matthew 5:1–12

When Ruth Bader Ginsburg died in September, on the first night of the Jewish holy days of Rosh Hashanah, we were taught that an appropriate tribute is to say “May her memory be a blessing.” Or “May her memory be for a blessing.” While the world mourned this champion of equality and justice, the timing of her death added an extra significance: it is sometimes said that a Jewish person who dies on Rosh Hashanah is a Tzaddek, a good and righteous person, someone who has helped to balance the scales toward a sustainable system of justice. Jewish thought teaches that when a person dies, it is up to those who bear their memory to keep the goodness of the person alive. This is done by speaking the name and carrying on legacy. And so when we speak of RBG and say, “May her memory be for a blessing,” the blessing implies that we should not just remember Ruth, but we should be like her.

During most memorial services or funerals that I officiate, the final prayer is one of commendation: We ask God to hold the one we remember in the eternal light of God’s peace. I often close that prayer by saying, “We commend Ruth’s spirit to God and to those who would choose to be keepers of her memory.” Remembering and memory . . . these are the heart of All Saints’ Day.

Today is what I call a tender day in the life of the church, as the candles on the communion table remind us of our great cloud of witnesses, and especially of those saints we have lost in this past year. Our grief expands as we witness the candles of COVID-19, each small flame representing 10,000 deaths. How do we even process that this disease, which has forced us to isolate, kept us from our loved ones, challenged every aspect of our status quo, has claimed the lives of 227,700 people in the United States alone, almost 1.2 million worldwide—and that number climbs higher every minute. And some of those represented in our paltry candle flames are our personal saints, loved ones with whom we were not allowed a gentle goodbye, a final farewell. And suddenly, our hearts swell with memories of those we have loved but no longer see. Because that is what tender days like this do: They unlock all those feelings we think we have safely stored away in the recesses of our spirit, a practice of self-protection honed over months, years, decades. And then we gaze upon the flames of the candles and we see the death toll rising and we hear the strains of the familiar “For All the Saints,” and all those powerful memories we are charged to keep begin to snowball. And while we may try to wish the sorrow away, fresh waves of grief begin to erupt within us. And today, to our surprise, we grieve for those we do not even know, for the hundreds of thousands of people whose breath was stolen by a disease of which there is little understanding and even less leadership in controlling.

The journey of grief is long, arduous and sometimes unrelenting. Whether close or far away from a death, we can lose our own breath when a memory is triggered, a moment remembered, our senses assaulted with familiar smells, sights, touch. Through our whirling dervish of emotions, comfort is often what we seek . . . reassurance that all will be well, that remembering will not always hurt, that the memories we keep will bring us joy rather than sorrow.

Our scripture today reminds us, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” This is us. Today. Right now.

The twelve verses of scripture John read for us today from the Gospel of Matthew are known as the Beatitudes, which begin Jesus’ famed “Sermon on the Mount.” The timing is early in his ministry: Jesus has been baptized by John and issued the decree that all should repent (literally translated as “turn around”) in order to know God. He has called his first disciples and has begun to travel about teaching, proclaiming the good news and healing people. By this time he had gathered quite a following, and so he climbed a mountain, brought the crowd together and began to preach.

The Sermon on the Mount lasts for three chapters and is a description of what Jesus wanted his followers to be and to do. It describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God. The sermon provides a value system for believers—an ethical standard, a religious devotion, an attitude towards money, ambition, lifestyle. The Sermon on the Mount presents life in the kin-dom of God, a fully human life lived out under the divine rule.

The nine Beatitudes are not statements about general human virtues—most appear the exact opposite to common wisdom. They are intended to pronounce a blessing on authentic discipleship. They are nine declarations about the blessedness (contrary to all appearances) of the community living in anticipation of God’s reign. They are directives to life together in the community of discipleship. This time of pandemic and racial reckoning and encountering mounting loss and enormous grief place us right within these words. “Yes,” our hearts respond, “we are the poor in the spirit, the ones who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the meek, the peacemakers.” The Beatitudes offer a central hub for those who walk the Christian path of action and contemplation. When we mourn, perhaps we are more merciful. When we hunger and thirst for righteousness, perhaps we are the most pure in heart. The ones we remember today also join us in this community—each knowing the experience of the Beatitudes in their lives and their legacies. The Beatitudes do not direct us into our becoming, they claim us in our now. Jesus looked out at the crowd who felt all the things we feel today, all the wonderings about what the future would hold and how they might make it through the next day. All the rending of their hearts over loss and death and despair. They were searching for meaning and purpose. And Jesus blessed them and offered them a new way to view their lives, to understand their world, to know God. And while mourning may not feel like a blessing, the memories we are charged with keeping certainly are. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote, “Grief is existential testimony to the worth of the one loved. . . . Every lament is a love-song.”

Friends, on this tender day, let us sing our love song for the memories we keep, for those we love and see no more, for the hundreds of thousands who have died because of COVID-19. And while we cannot name them all in this time, their names are known to God, and their memories are forever a blessing.

Let us pray:

Tender Loving God, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations; You are our guardian in life and death. By You we were brought into being, and in Your care and keeping we leave this life. We praise you for all your beloved who are now at rest with you. Especially this day we give thanks for those in our community who have died this year. May each name encourage a plethora of memories as we continue to grieve those with whom we have traveled this road of faith. We thank you for their gifts—by nature and by grace—which made each person unique and a distinctive presence in this congregation. May their legacies of faith, dedication and perseverance continue to inspire us as we move forward in the work to which you have called us. May their courage in both life and in death be a guiding force in our lives. May their memory be for a blessing.

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Holy One, we give you thanks for these saints in light, already fully known to you:

Marian "Meem" Asp	Melinda "Mindy" Macy	Barbara Ramsell
Patricia S. "Pat" Brunsberg	T. Kirkley "Kirk" Mark	Patricia "Pat" Stearns
Annabelle D. Bush	Charlotte K. Marrow	Dr. Robert Owre "Bob" Uppgaard
Robert J. "Bob" Holloway	Patricia H. "Pat" Morton	Patricia M. "Trish" Walsh
Virginia R. "Jinny" Humphrey	Roger J. Porter	Lillian V. Weber
Allan Lotsberg		Mary Lou Wilkinson

Gracious God, bless each keeper of memory as the gates of grief push open anew. In our remembering this day, our hearts burst with love that knows no bounds. We name before you our saints, O Comforting God, and give you thanks for all they were to us by nature and by grace, for their legacies, which will continue to shape our lives.

With broken hearts we pray for the multitudes who have died from COVID-19, names we will never fully know but have always been known to you. In the midst of our own grieving, we pray for comfort for their families and for healing to continue, and we offer thanksgiving for the ways their lives made a difference in ours, even without our knowing.

May we be mindful of all those souls who have gone on ahead of us and who have taught us how to be Your people. Let us clearly recognize what it means to be called children of God and to know we are to be your saints neither by our own inclination nor in our own strength but simply by your grace. May we live into this holy honor by loving others as You love us, reaching out with compassion and tenderness, offering comfort to the poor in spirit, to those who mourn, the meek, the peacemaker, the merciful . . .

May our memories be for a blessing. Amen.