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*All Saints Sunday*

*November 7, 2021*

*Isaiah 25:6-9, (Ps. 24; Rev. 21:1-6a); John 11:32-44*

One thing I noticed about the scripture readings for All Saints Sunday this year is the amount of tears in them. Isaiah talks about a promised future when God will swallow up death forever and wipe away the tears from all faces. Revelation says “the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.” And in the gospel reading from John, Mary wept when she said to Jesus, “Lord, if you have been here, my brother Lazarus would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping and those who were with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. And in the shortest verse of the whole Bible, verse 35, Jesus himself began to weep.

Weeping, crying, is a natural, normal, and, one could even argue, important response to death. I look at all 49 of these candles and think of the buckets of tears that were wept by the people who loved these saints when they died. Today when you place your own candle in the bowl of sand when you come forward to receive communion (Open Space) to remember other saints in your life who have died, you might remember the tears you wept after their deaths. You might even begin to cry when you light the candle. And that’s ok. This is a sanctuary, a safe place to cry and weep.

We cry over death because the hole those who have died leave in our lives and in the world is gaping and can never truly be “filled.”

We weep because death is irreversible—there is no surgery or medicine that can reverse death. Death is universal—every single living thing eventually dies. And death is final – in humans the heart literally stops, and the physical life of the body is done.

Death is irreversible. Death is universal. Death is final.

And this year we are faced with the horrific reality of death our entire planet has endured due to Covid-19: over 5 million people around the world have died from this insidious disease, including three-quarters of a million deaths

in this country, and 14 deaths in just the past 2 weeks in Whatcom County. Death has come closer and has caused more grief and tangled up our lives more than perhaps any other time we can remember.

Of course it makes sense that we would weep.

In today’s gospel from John chapter 11, Jesus goes to Bethany to be with Mary and Martha who are grieving the death of their brother Lazarus. Yes, Jesus is moved by the weeping around him and he, too, weeps. But it’s what happens before Jesus goes to Bethany that tells us something about Jesus, and something about our own grief.

At the beginning of John chapter 11, Jesus had just traveled across the Jordan River from Jerusalem, away from Bethany where Lazarus lived. While he was there, Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Though the Bible doesn’t say it, I’m pretty certain that Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to come immediately, to fix the situation. To make Lazarus’ illness go away. To take away their fear.

Often when we are facing the prospect of someone we love dying, our prayers take the same form:

Jesus, show up! Fix this situation! Make my loved ones’ illness go away! Take away my fear!

But the eleventh chapter of John tells us something interesting: verses five and six say, “Though Jesus loved Martha and her sister Mary, after hearing that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” Jesus did not come immediately. He didn’t fix the situation. He didn’t make Lazarus’ illness go away. Maybe we want to shake our heads at this: did Jesus really do that so that Lazarus could die and Jesus prove his power by raising Lazarus to life? Would Jesus be so callous as to make people suffer?

But I’m wondering instead if the reason Jesus didn’t come immediately, the reason that he didn’t rush to fix it, was because he was trying to create some space for Mary and Martha to grieve. Lazarus was going to die, and instead of trying to make their grief go away, Jesus was instead trying to show the importance of grieving, the importance of tears. Jesus created time and space for them to feel their loss, and then he joined them in their

grief. It doesn't say how long Jesus wept with them, but it was long enough for those around him to say, "See how he loved him!"

Jesus lingered in the lament with Mary and Martha, and then he displayed the power of the promise of resurrection. Lazarus came out of the tomb and Jesus commanded those who loved him to unbind him and let him go. In the same way, when someone we love dies, Jesus promises that they will experience resurrection with him in heaven, and to those of us on earth, he commands us to unbind the person who has died and to let them go. And throughout all of this, Jesus loves us and weeps with us.

One of the candles we lit today is for my friend Jeremy Fuerst who was the pastor at Central Lutheran Church in Everett. He died in September at age 43 while he was mountain climbing in Colorado, on a mountain my family had just visited in July. His wife, my friend Shannyn, is the pastor at Faith Lutheran Church in Seattle. I have been struck by what she has written since his death. One day she wrote that the best thing her friends in Seattle had been doing was just sitting with her, not saying a word, not trying to fix the situation, not trying to make her grief go away, but just sitting with her while she wept. Like Jesus did for Mary and Martha, they were giving space and time for Shannyn to grieve, to linger in the lament.

Shannyn is a pastor. She knows that Jeremy has experienced the promise of resurrection given to him in baptism. She knows that Jesus loves her and weeps with her, and she has unbound Jeremy and let him go into Jesus' embrace. And yet even though she knows those things, it is the space her friends have given her to linger in her lament which have helped her to believe them.

My prayer for you this All Saints Sunday, and every time you grieve, is that you take the time and space to weep, to lament. I pray that you let others sit with you to give you time and space to grieve, and I pray that when others grieve you can just sit with them, too. And I pray that you trust that Jesus weeps with you, and in our promised future when God will swallow up death forever and wipe away the tears from all faces, including yours. Amen.