

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, this is a holy day. It is the day we celebrate our living, our ability to be in your service, our ability to know and live in your everlasting love. It is also a day of solemnity, a day of recognizing that for many we know, many we love, their journey on your green earth has come to a conclusion, and they now rest in your everlasting arms. It is a day of goodness and of tears, a day of recognizing beginnings, ends, and new beginnings, with all the emotions interspersed. They leave us in this life, but never alone. They leave behind goodness and love, and we reaffirm our business and calling to do the same.

Gracious God, we lift the names of those we have lost in this last year as well as those who departed from us throughout our lives. We name our grief, our sadness at these holes in our lives, holes that cannot be easily filled. Even as we grieve, God, we take heart in the Gospel message, that all things will be made new, that with you, we can consistently find redemption and hope that conquers even through the darkness. May it always be so, God.

Gracious God, as we are living, we recognize your mission isn't over; the pains and struggles of a broken world stand before us. We extend our hands in prayer as we ready our feet to move in service. We pray for the joys and struggles we have named in this holy space today. We lift them up to you in celebration, in fear, in supplication. Walk among us, holy one, to release our burdens and to revel with us in our happiness. We pray all things in the Lord of life's joys, the Lord who conquered death, the Lord who never leaves us behind, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one people, across time, space, and life...

SERMON

When I was a young boy, I loved it when my grandfather from Bellevue, NE came to visit. He seemed to know how to connect with me as a young boy. He was bald, stark bald,

not a single hair on his head. He worked with his hands as a carpenter; testimonies of his work are the cabinets that still stand in my home in Nebraska. Most of all, he was a man of deep faith. He taught me to love Malt-O-Meal, and we would watch Bozo the Clown together. We always seemed to have fun in his big red truck, driving around. I remember one time I knew we were travelling together. I grabbed two toy fire helmets from my toybox, donned one of them, and then pulled the other out when we were driving along in his big red truck. He could have told me what a foolish thing it was to give him a fire helmet at his advanced age, but instead, he took it, he put it on, and we rode in that big red truck no longer. We rode in an imaginary fire truck onwards to adventure.

I didn't get to know my grandfather as well as I wanted to. He died unexpectedly when I was ten years old. I remember him as loving and jolly. But I take a lot with me he left behind. In Third Grade, we had a Grandfather come to School day, and I asked him to come. He hesitated and said that, well, he had some busy upcoming days and couldn't make it. Five minutes after I hung up the phone, he called me back and said he would be there. It was worth it. One day, after we ate breakfast on one of his and grandma's visits, he took his napkin, folded it a couple of times, and just like that he gave me a little napkin hat. I loved it, kept it, and put it away. I still have that little reminder of him, but twenty years after he died, I realize that there are many things he left behind with me. I have these memories, Malt-O-Meal, and this small, crumpled napkin hat that I take with me.

Today is All Saints Day, the day we recognize what our loved ones have left behind with us when they go to be with the Lord. Today, we have brought items that allow us to remember all they left with us. In these things we see compassion, we see unconditional love, we see caring. We use them to see their faces again, to hear their voices move through

our memories. We have these remembrances to alleviate the grief. We do not leave them behind, but they have to leave these remnants behind as they moved on to God. With these things, photos, items, gifts, we devote these loved ones, these blessed saints, those who were a part of our fellowship and those we remember outside of this body today not as souls lost in the sands of time but beloved saints now who rest in the arms of God Eternal. They are no longer with us but are transformed into newness with God smiling upon them.

Jeanene, Larry, Frank...all of these members of our fellowship have touched each of us in different ways. I will always remember Jeanene's involvement, her faith, and her desire to do all that she could for the benefit of God's people despite her limitations. I will remember Larry's dedication, his unswerving devotion to his wife, his Lord and his church. I remember fondly partaking in the rededication of Larry and Joan's wedding vows. I will always remember Frank's sense of humor, his jolliness in the midst of so many health problems, and his devotion to Jan. I will never forget how honored I was to partake in the union of Jan and Frank. I also remember the day I learned each of these saints died: the tears from their loved ones, their funerals, and the mourning that followed. These things they left behind with me, things that I will take into a life of greater ministry. I know you have many other stories that allow you to remember what they left behind with you. Beyond those in our fellowship, we carry many we know, we love, and many we have shared life with in our sorrow of loss. In these regards, it was a tough year.

We remember on this day that all things must pass away. When we mourn, we must take time to remember all they left behind with us. There are times that bring us laughter and joy. There are times that draw us to tears. There are things that bring us close in the midst of the absence, but, at the end of the day, nothing can fill the gap left behind. Nothing

can fulfill the hugs, the words of comfort, the words of understanding that only that person can provide. There is a hole in our lives that has no answer, and even so, we might try to fill it...with no luck. That is not the fulfillment of grief but the denial of grief. Grief cannot come to its conclusion when we try to end it with the wrong things or fail to recognize the pain. What is left behind can be substituted for what is missing, and we miss the point of what we were created by God to do. We miss those we have lost, the situations we were in, and we create a new normal in the midst of the struggle. It is not an easy process, but it means that these things left behind take new meaning. It becomes a testament to the memory of our loved ones and the God they served.

At the end of the day, life is the process of growing, living each day, and moving forward to follow God's calling. It's the process of leaving the right things behind. Today, we celebrate how these saints left the right things behind throughout life. We seek to leave behind that which is best, that which gives others hope and empowerment to live the Gospel life. My grandfather did that. The saints we recognize did that. That is what the process of mourning is all about. We miss the goodness they leave with us; the better things are they leave behind, the more grief we feel. Some things must be left behind because, after all, nothing is permanent in this life.

At the same time, with God, endings are never just endings. Endings are opportunities for newness. Death is an opportunity for Resurrection. All Saints Day is not a testimony of what is left behind; it is a testimony of what is left behind being a prelude to what is yet to come. Our loved ones are not gone but transformed in the arms of God. Our world will ultimately find new life alongside us. We have the ultimate hope from scripture, today in Revelation and Isaiah. Revelation tells us that when all days are through and evil

and death are ultimately conquered, there will be the ultimate rebirth of all creation. God will make all things new. Even creation must die a kind of death before it can be renewed into the New Earth, when God is physically among us. We just completed our bible study on Revelation, and one theme we continued to pick up is that this newness does not come easily. It comes through a lot of testing and struggle before we can reach the new life promised in the end. Isaiah gives us another image of the world beyond time, wherein God resides and the same image is repeated: God will wipe every tear from our eyes. The feast will be set before us, and we will live with God forever.

In his writings and teachings, the Bishop Rueben Job wrote about putting on his home clothes. He recalled his younger days when he went to school and did all the work he needed to. At the end of the day, though, he looked forward to taking off his school and work clothes and putting on his home clothes, clothes that gave him comfort and peace after a long day of work. In that way, he likened his story to shedding our mortal coils and moving into the presence of God. We are here to be in the service of God, to grow in grace, to attend to the needs of our neighbor. At the end of the day, at the end of this journey, we shed our work clothes, so to speak, and put on our home clothes, a new existence, a new life, where we are fully at home.

Take heart, friends: we have a future in the arms of God when we put on our “home clothes.” God will destroy death; God will conquer what is lost in Resurrection. God will wipe every tear from every eye, and we will feast with our Creator when death has died and sin is no more. There is much that we will leave behind, but what a joy we gain! What I will not promise is that it will be easy to get there. Some things have to be left behind in many meanings of the phrase. Sometimes we must leave behind what we want; sometimes

it is our selfish attitudes. We also have a calling to leave behind in this world the signs of the Gospel of Christ: compassion, love, caring, accountability. No matter what, these things are never forgotten, never forsaken, never dismissed. One day we will be reunited, and what is left behind will be made whole once again. In this hope, we take heart and move on in the everlasting grace and calling of Jesus Christ.

Today is a time of endings and of new beginnings. Endings prompt new beginnings, the beginning new life. As long as we live, as long as we have breath within us, our tasks on this earth are not done. We have an opportunity to serve God in our many ways. We have opportunities to worship and praise the one who gives and renews life within us. We have opportunities to serve the neighbor whom God gave us to love and care for. These fruits we leave behind when our work on earth is done. Nevertheless, right now, the tasks are not done, in spite of ending, in spite of uncertain times and uncertain futures, for the God who holds it all remains ever in control. For the past, for times gone by and never to return, for tears of loss and the fragments we hold onto, for the fruits our loved ones left behind to make the world a better place, to the present of joy and heartbreak, and to the future still unseen, we all say "Thanks be to God!" Amen and Amen.