



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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“Love Transcends”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On November 3, 2024, All Saints Sunday, from Ruth 1 & Wisdom 3

My daughter Lucy and I love going to the movies. Unfortunately, all she wants to see these days are horror movies, which give me nightmares. But when she was younger, it was all *Disney/Pixar*. Sometimes I think we’ve seen every film created since the “Disney Renaissance” began in 1989. Over the years I’ve noticed one of the surprising yet prevalent themes that recurs in these movies is the veneration of ancestors. From *The Lion King*, to *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, *Brother Bear*, *Moana*, *Coco*, and *Turning Red*, ancestor veneration has been a common part of their animated storylines for thirty years, especially when *Disney/Pixar* is trying to tell a story from African, Asian, Native American, Polynesian, or Latine culture.

Of the films that depict the veneration of ancestors, *Coco* stands apart for how critical it is to the plot of the story. Set in the small Mexican town in the week leading up to Día de los Muertos or “Day of the Dead” as families gather to remember and pay respects to those who have died, the story focuses on Miguel de la Cruz. An energetic child from a lower-class family of shoemakers, Miguel rejects his family business because of a secret desire to play guitar like his idol, the famed musician Ernesto de la Cruz. This is a blasphemy to his grandma whose grandfather abandoned their family to pursue a music career. But when he knocks over a picture on the family ofrenda, Miguel discovers the great Ernesto de la Cruz may have been his great-great-grandfather. So, on Día de los Muertos, he steals de la Cruz’s famous guitar and is accidentally transported into the spirit world. There he finds the souls of the departed live in peace and happiness, so long as they are remembered by their family. But if they are forgotten by their families, they disappear forever.

It’s the perfect All Hallows Eve/All Saints Day movie, which is no surprise since the Day of the Dead is a combination of indigenous Mexican and Christian cultures. And the song that holds the story together has the beautiful words, “Remember me, Though I have to say goodbye. Remember me, don’t let it make you cry. Forever if I’m far away, I hold you in my heart, I sing a secret song to you, each night we are apart. Remember me, Though I have to travel far, remember me, each time you hear a sad guitar. Know that I’m with you, the only way that I can be. Until you’re in my arms again, remember me.” There is something profoundly spiritual about remembering the dead. While I love the costumes and candy, ‘trick or treating’ and parties on Halloween, it would be a shame if we neglected the original reason for this holiday: our ancestors are still with us in “the only way that they can be,” and we are called not only to remember and venerate them, but to commune with them.

I think *Disney/Pixar* is trying to tell us that we have a lot to learn from immigrants in America about the veneration of our ancestors. For one thing, we are not alone. The Surgeon General has said we are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection that is having a devastating impact on our mental, physical, and social health. And it could be argued the reason we feel so lonely is that we miss our ancestors.



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Somehow, we've lost touch with them, we've detached from them, we've forgotten them. I'm willing to bet very few of us created an altar to our deceased ancestors when we put up our Halloween decorations, and this absence of connection to our ancestors in our lives is why writer Steven Crandell believes that the West, and Americans more intensely, are suffering from ADD or "Ancestor Deficit Disorder,"ⁱⁱⁱ which he claims is a "a spiritual epidemic."

Crandell writes, "A tree without roots cannot grow. When we lose our roots, we too begin to wither—losing our balance, emotional health, and spiritual foundation." Ancestor Deficit Disorder, according to Crandell, causes anxiety, lack of wonder, loss of individual destiny, chronic cynicism, low levels of gratitude, spiritual withdrawal, emotional resignation, disconnection of heart and mind, loss of faith, and atrophy of joy." He claims we need to remember, give thanks, and connect with our ancestors for friendship, love, guidance, and support so we can cope with all the difficulty and disappointment in our lives, grieve our losses, and find our equilibrium. To bring this home, Crandell quotes an African shaman from Swaziland who once said, "Tell the Westerners that they have lost the way. They need to know that the cause of many of their problems is neglect of their ancestral spirits."

While I cannot ensure you go home and build an ofrenda for your deceased relatives, I can invite you to reflect on the story of one of Jesus' ancestors, a woman named Ruth. Her story takes place in the time of the Judges, the most disruptive period in the history of Israel, and begins the way many immigrant stories begin, with a great famine causing a mass shortage of food, water, jobs, and economic precarity that forces a woman named Naomi and her husband Elimelech to leave their hometown of Bethlehem and migrate to the land of Moab with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Their names mean "sickness" and "annihilation," which symbolically foreshadows the tragedy that will befall their family. Elimelech dies first, leaving Naomi a widow. Her sons marry two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, but then the sons die as well, leaving Naomi a childless widow with no means of security in a harsh, dangerous, and patriarchal world.

Eventually, Naomi hears there is food in Bethlehem again and makes a plan to return home. Before leaving, she gives her daughter-in-law's a blessing, "May God deal kindly with you as you have dealt kindly with the dead and with me. May you return to your mother's house, may the Lord grant you a husband, and may you find peace and security there." Then she kisses them, and they weep aloud. At first both Ruth and Orpah refuse to leave Naomi, but eventually Orpah, whose name means "back of the neck," kisses Naomi goodbye and turns back home to her people and her gods. But Ruth, on the other hand, clings to her mother-in-law Naomi like a spouse and makes her a sacred and solemn vow; one of the most beautiful in all of scripture: "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die. There will I be buried. May the Lord do this and more to me, if even death parts me from you!"



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Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

While the story of Ruth is set in the time of the Judges, it was an oral tradition passed down through the centuries. Scholars tell us that the story wasn't written down officially until the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, which was an era of widespread xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. Ruth was written after the return from exile, at a time when new judges ruled over Israel, who forbid the Jewish people from marrying foreigners and deported immigrants from Jerusalem. So, the old story of Ruth, which pre-dated the Davidic monarchy, was written down as a counter cultural testimony and alternative witness to challenge the xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment of the current time. Ruth was written to remind the people of a time when the extraordinary faith and love of immigrant woman from Moab saved Naomi and her people from annihilation.

The Israelites and Moabites originated from the same family, had ancestors in common, and descended from brothers, Abraham and Lot. Yet Deuteronomy 23 explicitly states Moabites should never be included in the community of Israel. They were Israel's most hated enemies, and then along comes the story of Ruth to challenge the exclusionary sentiment that was written into Jewish law itself. Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi exemplifies extravagant compassion for the sake of another. She gave up the security of her country, her parents, her family, her home, her land, her ancestors, and her gods to take Naomi as her family and her home, and to adopt Naomi's land, ancestors, and gods as her own. Ruth promised that she would die by whatever means Naomi dies, even if by stoning, burning, decapitation, or hanging. And Ruth vowed that she would be buried in the same ground and the same grave as Naomi. Even more, Ruth pledged that when Naomi is no longer living, she would not return to Moab but will stay in Israel forever.

When we unite ourselves in love, marriage, family, friendship, or community with another person or people, we unite ourselves with all their ancestors as well. Our ofrenda gets larger as we radically expand the great cloud of witnesses that surround us and support us so we can run the race of life with resilience and perseverance. Ruth's faith and love for Naomi, her people, her land, her ancestors, and her god is described with a special Hebrew word that is almost always reserved for God—*hesed*, which is often poorly translated as "loving-kindness." *Hesed* is an impossibly difficult word to say in English because it contains so many aspects. It describes a love that goes beyond anything that could be expected, beyond the application of the law, beyond duty and obligation. And *hesed* is also loyalty and fidelity that is steadfast, faithful and true, based on an ardent promise, agreement, vow, or covenant.

But *hesed* not only refers to this deep sense of love and loyalty, but also the compassionate behaviors of mercy and compassion it inspires. *Hesed* is about both belief and action, being and doing, feeling and living. This is why Micah 6:8 is so important, because it is best translated, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, **to *hesed***, and to walk humbly with God?" We reduce the power of this scripture when we simply say, "to love kindness," because the word is *hesed*! The prophet Micah was telling us that what the Lord requires of us is to, "Do justice, to love like the immigrant Ruth did, and to walk humbly with God." Can you imagine what it was like to hear this story at a time when anti-immigrant sentiment was at a fever pitch?



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Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

I believe you can! The story of Ruth was not just a story of a wonderful foreigner who saved Naomi but established the line of King David and became an ancestor of Jesus. Her story was a reminder to the people of Israel that there was a time in history when they wouldn't have made it without the immigrant. And as it turns out, the foreigner is not so foreign after all. They are part of our family.

Scholar Judy Fentress-Williams says, “Ruth is a survival manual for a world divided by identity politics. Through the lens of the post-colonial, Ruth calls us to reconcile our connection as humanity, to focus on what unites us and not what divides us. It reminds us that God is working through people we deem as “the other” or “less than.” And it takes the most hated, rejected, and excluded “other” and makes them a faithful redeemer who exhibits the *hesed* of God. Ruth demands that we remember we are all a part of the same human family. Even if our parents are different, we all share the same blood. All our divisions are false. All our compartments are constructed. All our borders are made up. And separation is our greatest lie.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We live in a time of great disruption and xenophobia not unlike the time of the Judges or when Ruth was finally written. It would be very easy for us to imagine the greatest problems we face are hatred, extremism, partisanship, misinformation, racism, bigotry, or nationalism. But the greatest problem we face is division itself, which is not based on the idea we are diverse and different people, but that our diversity and differences fundamentally separate us from each other as human beings. Separation is a lie that keeps families broken, religion violent, politics intractable, nations divided, creation crumbling, and grief hopeless. The reason we suffer so much is because we've come to believe that separation is inevitable. But *hesed* exists, love exists, to expose and destroy the lie of separation, and love is the only force that has the power to transcend our divisions and reveal that we're all connected.

Author Charles Eisenstein writes, “[There is a] common root underneath all the diverse crises of the modern age. Underlying the vast swath of ruin our civilization has carved is not human nature, but the opposite: humanity denied. This denial of human nature rests upon an illusion, a misconception of self and world. We have defined ourselves as other than we are, as discrete subjects separate from each other and separate from the world around us... Saints and mystics have tried for thousands of years to teach us how we are trapped in a delusion, [yet] we think of separation as a good-thing, as freedom, independence, and as an ascent in which we have risen above our animal origins.”^{iv}

Yet whether it is separation from God, Creation, dead ancestors, or other people, Eisenstein claims the ideology of separation is what has generated the converging crises of our world today and threatens to destroy us. But separation is an illusion. It is a lie! The reality is we are not separate from God, or Creation, or our ancestors, or each other. We are deeply connected with everyone and everything. What happens to one affects the other. As Dr. King said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” We need each other, we're dependent upon each other, we are not whole without our neighbors, our ancestors, Creation, or God.



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Eisenstein suggests the solution to the lie of separation is the deep medicine of reciprocity and interbeing, the ability to fully embody the reality that we are not independent of one another, our ancestor, Creation, or God, but completely and totally interdependent; cosmically and biologically bound up together; not separate at all, but symbiotic.

Luis Urrea was born with tuberculosis in Tijuana, and his parents believed he would die if they did not migrate to America. When Luis was 17, his father Alberto returned to his village in Mexico to get money for his son's education but was tragically murdered. His father's death prompted Luis to write an essay processing his grief that spawned a career as an award-winning poet and novelist. He once wrote this, "English! It's made up of all these untidy words, man. Have you noticed? Native American (*skunk*), German (*waltz*), Danish (*twerp*), Latin (*adolescent*), Scottish (*feckless*)... on and on. It's a glorious wreck (a good old Viking word). Glorious, I say, in all its shambling, mutable beauty. People daily speak a quilt work of words, continents and nations and tribes and even enemies dance all over your mouth when you speak. Words are the only bread we can really share. When I say 'we,' I mean every one of us, everybody, all of you, each border patrol agent and every trembling Mexican peering through the fence. Each confused mother and every disappointed dad. For I am nobody's son. But I am everyone's brother. We belong to each other. So come here to me. Walk me home."^v

Every American has an immigrant as an ancestor, and on All Saints, we remember those who have come on before us, the community of our ancestors, the great cloud of witnesses who surround us and support us as we live in a dangerous and disruptive time. We can be encouraged by the fact that many of our ancestors, like the founders of this church, lived through times that were worse than the ones we live in, and they not only survived, but found a way to thrive. But on All Saints, we also remember that no matter how lonely and divided we feel as Americans today, we are not alone, and we are not separate from each other. We are rooted and grounded in the love of our ancestors and separation is a terrible lie. There is nothing that can separate us from love from *being hesed*. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from that love.

There are no boarders, no boundaries, no political parties, no ideologies, no nations, no ethnicities, no races, no genders, no abilities, no sexualities, no religions, no classes, no creeds, no denominations, no divisions, no problems, no troubles, no trials, no tribulations that can separate us. Death cannot separate us. Love transcends the grave. We are cosmically connected, universally united, infinitely bound to one another, wonderfully woven together, across time and space. Separation is an illusion; separation is a lie. Love transcends everything. All we need to do is remember.



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ⁱ Roberto Lopez and Kristen-Anderson Lopez, “Remember Me,” from Disney/Pixar *Coco*, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Steven Crandell, “Ancestor Deficit Disorder,” *HUFFPOST*, June 11, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Judy Fentress-Williams, *Ruth: Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries*, 2012.

^{iv} Charles Eisenstein, *The Ascent of Humanity: Civilization and the Human Sense of Self*, North Atlantic Books: Berkley, 2007.

^v On Being with Krista Tippett, “Luis Alberto Urrea: On Our Belonging to Each Other,” July 12, 2018.