

SMT Article for November 30, 2018

“Remembering” by Rev. Jan Cook, Senior Associate Pastor, San Marino Community Church

“The Celtic stories suggest that time as the rhythm of soul has an eternal dimension where everything is gathered and minded. Here nothing is lost. This is a great consolation: The happenings in your life do not disappear. Nothing is ever lost or forgotten. Everything is stored within your soul in the temple of memory.”
(from *Anam Cara* by John O’Donohue)

The seasons and their celebrations are a way of marking time for the human experience. It is the cycle of leaving and returning that give us comfort and in some extraordinary way make us less afraid and more hopeful. We may find our senses are heightened and the sights, sounds and smells of certain moments are a potent catalyst for visceral memory. During the holidays, the anniversaries of loss will bring a more poignant, bittersweet and dramatic reaction than perhaps remembering on a Tuesday afternoon in March. For anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one, whether it occurred in spring, winter, summer or fall, it is felt most deeply throughout the seasons in which we gather with those in whom we have the greatest sense of belonging.

How do we respond to such active grief during what is deemed to be the *most wonderful time of the year*? We remember together. There are clearly no magical words that make grief disappear or that assuage the raw and tender soul that comes with loss. There are no shortcuts, no pill to forget; no antidote for what ails those who suffer from grief. What we can offer is community. We are able to come alongside and be traveling companions with those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We can validate their grief and provide tangible experiences for their intangible loss. We can celebrate the lives of those they loved and in doing so we celebrate life itself.

Some churches hold services during Christmas called “Blue Christmas” or “The Longest Night”, to acknowledge that, for many reasons, there are a greater number of incidents of depression and suicide during the holidays. Many have felt these services to be a lifeline that sees them through to the other side of their pain.

Each November SMCC holds a *Service of Remembrance*. We plan it for the beginning of the holiday season before Thanksgiving as a validation that seasonal grief is a reality. Weeks before the service we invite any in the congregation who have experienced loss to fill out a card with the name of their loved one as they wish it to be read during the service. The people gather in Christ Chapel in a setting of candles and gentle music. There is a table with a winding road of sand on it and votive candles lined on each side. A single taper is lit in the center.

During the service we sing, read the Holy Scriptures, reflect and pray together in simple, ancient acts of worship. At the heart of the service is the reading of the names of loved ones. The pace is slow and thoughtful and family members are invited to come forward and light a candle for the person they are remembering. In this simple gesture the forces of memory are released and together the community experiences the love and the loss of each individual. Together we become a force of healing and comfort.

During this holy season may you be blessed with a community that surrounds you with love and care and may you be a blessing to others who are hurting and in need.