

Sermon: "The Breaking of the Golden Bowl"

Date: October 31, 2021

Scriptures: Psalm 90, Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8

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We gather today on the edge of October. If today were one day further into the calendar, we would be celebrating All Saints' Day this Sunday morning. Instead the world around us is still filled with spooky ghosts and skeletons. Instead of worshipping in a world full of tired children who have eaten far too much candy, we are gathered in a world where the festivities of Halloween are still in full swing.

As a minister, Halloween is an interesting day for me because of my own life. In my "secular" life, I found Halloween to be particularly amusing. Halloween was my favorite holiday as a child and I never really corrupted the holiday with some of the more sordid aspects that often shift as people age. I have continued to enjoy Halloween as an adult with a sense of childlike amusement at costumes, candy, and frightful pranks.

As a professional member of the clergy, the holiday is fascinating for a completely different reason. Halloween comes from All Hallow's Eve. The celebration of All Saints' Day has had many names over the centuries including All Hallows' and All Hallowmass, which can be understood as meaning "A Mass Celebrating All of the Faithful Dead." The church celebrates the faithful dead on one day and the day before the world is filled with spooky stories revolving around frightening things.

A little known secret is that I adore Celtic Christianity and one of my favorite concepts from Celtic Christianity can lend to a certain perspective of why I believe a lot of people have a sense of fascination

with this time of year. In Celtic Christianity there is a concept called a “thin place.” Thin places are where the bounds between heaven and earth begin to break down. In such places, there is an almost holy sense that the divine is close. For the Celtic Christians, these spaces were often places of natural beauty and wonder. When entering into these places the holy and other worldly seemed especially close.

In my own life there have been a few thin places where I have experienced the divine. There is a particular rock at a summer camp that I spent more time praying at over the years, there is a ridge in Letchworth State Park that is a place of beauty and contemplation, and a hollow beneath the trees in our nearby national forest that have become spiritual waypoints on my journey. When I am near these places, I am drawn like a magnet. Beneath the trees in our nearby forest I have found my own Garden of Gethsemane where I bring all of myself to God and ask the big questions.

What does this have to do with All Hallow’s Eve? I wonder whether or not this time of year is a cultural thin place, especially for those of us in the northern hemisphere. The leaves are falling off the trees and the plants of summer are wilting away. The branches grow as barren as a skeleton and the wind is chilly as it blows through the branches without slowing through the leaves. The creatures of the spring have long since ceased bearing children and are hibernating, bulking up, or migrating away. The world grows cold and silent like a tomb. What do we think about culturally? We think about death.

Our culture is not the first to connect the autumn with thoughts of death and the macabre. For the ancient Greeks, fall and winter were marked by the descent of Persephone, a minor goddess, to be with Hades. The descent of Persephone to the underworld caused her mother to become so depressed that every crop in the world withered and famine

covered the world. For the Norse, the goddess Hel controlled both the powers of winter and the powers of death. For the aboriginal celtic faith, the crone who was celebrated at Samhain, a holiday that inspired the Christian use of November 1st for all Saints Day, began the new year in the celtic calendar by assisting in the passing of both the year and the passing of souls from one life to the next as she ruled over winter with her understanding of life and death. Indeed, the symbols of this one particular figure continue to hide in plain sight. The symbols of a cauldron, a familiar cat or crow, and an old woman continue to connect the holiday to its roots as the crone continues to show her face as a witch who often holds the power over life and death.

This time of year has fascinated people who connected this moment with death through both contemplation, theology, and even poetry. I was going to find some poems talking about the falling of leaves and the coming of death, but there were too many to choose from in a fair manner. As people, (not just as Christian people living in the 21st century, but as people in general) we have a strange relationship with death. We may not like to admit the simple facts, but save the coming of Christ happening before we pass on, many if not all of us in this room will experience death. It seems macabre at first glance, but we are a people that thrive and live as a result of death.

From our birth, we live because we eat food that gives us what we need. When we are young, we may drink milk produced from our mothers, but where do they find that energy? From the first moments we eat baby food to the last meal we eat, we thrive off of the harvesting of living entities, whether they be plants or animals. When time comes, we each know that our bodies will return to the earth. In time, we will nourish the world around us, which will eventually bring forth new life. We live off of the passing of living plants and animals and we ourselves will return from the world that bore us all.

For the writer of Ecclesiastes, this was a simple concept that pervaded his understanding of the world. In the life of Ecclesiastes there were countless moments where Ecclesiastes asked what the purpose of life might be as the years passed. When Ecclesiastes wrote down his reflections on life, the inevitability of it all continues to come up over and over again. The chapters of Ecclesiastes 3, 8, 9, and 10 point out that the wicked and the righteous each experience death. Ecclesiastes 4, 5, 9, and 10 spares neither the rich nor the poor. Multiple times Ecclesiastes tells people to enjoy what they have while they go through this world because this world will eventually come to an end regardless of your path on the journey of life.

In the passage we just read, the young are told to enjoy themselves while they have the chance. Consider the words at the end of chapter 11 again: (11:7-10)

Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. Banish anxiety from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

Ecclesiastes encourages the young to enjoy their time, but to remember that there will come a difficult day. As Ecclesiastes progresses through his rumination, the scene is laid out before us of a beautiful place filled with gold, silver, and all the marks of wealth, power, and privilege. There are strong servants, beautiful things, and

daughters in song. What happens? The strong grow bent, the singers are silenced, and the beautiful things break down over time. I was personally struck by the phrasing in chapter 11:5-7

...all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.

When the bowl broke as I read that passage for the first time, I saw my own life like a liquid held in that beautiful bowl. As it shattered, my life poured out and I did not know where it would go. Truly, this description of the end of our days could be just as macabre as any story we might read on a spooky night like tonight. The days of beauty pass and then we all come to a point where we must embrace that great mystery known as death.

For many of us, this might make us incredibly anxious. One of the reasons that I wanted to share this message today was that I wanted to normalize thinking about such things. Thinking about the fact that we will one day die can be incredibly traumatic. While I love All Saints' Sunday, it is often a celebration of what happens after we embrace that mystery known as death. We have come to believe in heaven and have come to trust in a living Christ. We have come to believe that if we are baptized into Christ's death then we are baptized into his resurrection.¹ Indeed, we have come to believe that Christ has dominion over death and that even after death itself we are in the hands of a loving God.²

¹ Romans 6:3-4

² Romans 5:6-11

We talk about being in the hands of a loving God often. We talk about the fact that God cares for us in this life and we claim faith that we are alive with God after death on a regular basis, but we rarely acknowledge that the very act of experiencing death personally can be frightening. In this moment, I will clearly state one intention of this sermon. I want to express clearly that it is okay to be nervous, concerned, and fearful in such moments.

Nobody said being a Christian meant that you could no longer feel your feelings, even if they are anxious and frightening at times. Last week our reading included 1 Peter 5:7 which is a verse that I highly recommend memorizing (and which I am working on remembering myself after I realized that I let the exact wording slip my mind over the years). In the New Revised Standard Version, that passage says: "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you."

Do you know why Peter invited us to hand over our anxiety to God? Peter understood that we do have anxieties to give to God. It was not just Peter. One of my favorite things about Paul's famous quote in Philippians 4 is that it follows Philippians 2. In Philippians 4:6 Paul says: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." This is lovely advice which follows what Paul says in Philippians 2:28 about Epaphroditus, a coworker of Paul who had faced and overcome illness: "I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious." Yes, that is Paul writing people to tell them to not be anxious after admitting earlier in his letter that he was anxious. Paul wrote to the Philippians about anxiety not to shame them about being anxious but out of the understanding that both they and he faced things that made them anxious.

There is nothing wrong with feeling your feelings. Yes, it is true that it would take the literal second coming of Christ for us to avoid death. Yes, it is true that it appears likely that all of us here will die one day. We will all face the mystery of what happens when the golden bowl of life is shattered. This may make us anxious and it is okay to feel that way.

It is also okay to trust that anxiety to God. I have been open in the past about the fact that I am in the midst of a lifelong journey of recovery and part of that journey has meant finding different ways to deal with anxieties than those ways modeled by an alcoholic mother. I have had to come face to face with my anxieties, so I feel free to say this simple word about anxiety.

When it comes to handing over anxiety to God, whether over loneliness, sadness, grief, or even the fear of death, the best piece of advice I ever heard was that I do not need to hand over tomorrow's anxiety. Sometimes the best way to deal with anxiety is to give it over a day at a time, an hour at a time, even a moment at a time. There are moments when it may seem that fear is so massive that you cannot even begin to find a way through. There are moment when it may seem like it would be easier to walk a thousand miles than face the thing that frightens us. In those moments, the important thing is not to conquer your fear but to take the first step down that road. There are moments when we need to take things one moment at a time.

For me, that's where the Psalm comes into our story. The Psalm acknowledges that people are here for a moment. The psalm is clear that the people are dust and that we are here but a moment. Humans are here for a moment in the lifespan of a being that sees a thousand years as just a single day. The psalmist is realistic about how long life shall be and about the fact that the end will come. All the people are

like dreams that are swept away in a moment, and the psalmist acknowledges this reality of life.

The Psalmist then claims his faith. The psalmist claims that God has been the dwelling place of God's people for generations in Psalm 90:1-2. The psalmist claims the everlasting nature of God and leans into a loving relationship with the one that has cared for generation after generation of people. In Psalm 90:13-17 the psalmist moves beyond the reality that life is short to ask God's favor in this moment. If Psalm 90:9 says that our years come to an end like a sigh, then these verses ask that God be close and caring throughout the days that the people have under the sun. The psalmist both acknowledges the brief nature of life and then claims the truth: God has been faithful for generations, God will be faithful after we are gone, and God is faithful in this moment.

For me the psalmist really understands something profoundly powerful about life. The years pass, the autumn comes, and the harvest comes to an end. The cycle of life will repeat itself as the seeds wait for spring and new life comes again. I was born, I will age, and one day I will likely pass away. Meanwhile, my children are now in this world: they too were born, will age, and will likely pass. Who knows if they will have children, but if they do then my grandchildren will be born, will age, and will likely pass. Through all of the generations that have been, through all that will come, and in the ones that walk the earth, God has continued to be God. Even if it feels like God wants little to do with me at times or even has a grudge against me at other moments, God is still God.

When I keep that in mind, I find myself less afraid of what happens when that golden bowl will break. I may never understand what will

happen until it happens, but until that moment I can choose to trust in the God who has been here, will be here, and is here now.

Meanwhile, the skeletons will jangle and the ghosts will hang from the trees. Some will hand out treats tonight and others will try to trick their friends with a fright. The Wiccan will consider the crone and perhaps someone will toast Hel. For me, none of that will really change my mind in these moments. For today, I will choose to hand over my fears and anxieties to God. If I cannot hand it over forever, I will do my best to hand it over for today. With that trust in mind, allow me to end our time by reading from Romans 8:31-39 (NRSV):

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that 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, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.