

Symbol and Ritual:
Healing the Heart as We Say Goodbye
In the Presence of Mystery

Ecclesiastes 3:1-23; II Corinthians 4:16-5:5; I Corinthians 15:20

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Having decided that we would gather once again as dear friends with wonderful shared memories, the next thing was to find a date. Being retired I'm always available but, in the case of Mr. Bryson, that is not the case. He seems to get busier as the years go by as congregations ply for his services. And then to find a date free on his calendar that coincided with an open Sunday on Gwenneth's calendar was the challenge. The first such date was today, November 1, which happens to be All Saints Day. The date was set sometime near the end of August, the time of the funeral of Teddy Kennedy.

Nancy and I spent nearly eight hours in front of the TV that day, totally immersed in the event. I knew immediately what I wanted to deal with this morning – the Funeral Mass of the Resurrection and All Saints Day – it brought back a flood of memories and emotions. There were several moments throughout that Saturday that I sat with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat as I was touched by the grandeur of the cathedral, the great organ, the strong processional hymn, the liturgy, the vestments – all the great pageantry, the solemnity, the celebration of a life in the reality of death before the Sacred Mystery, in the presence of God.

It was, for me, so deeply moving – and I knew that today I wanted to reflect on all of that because I realized so poignantly what I have missed not having a community of faith with whom to share the unfolding Liturgical Year – not only the unfolding Christian Year as season follows season, but even my week – I cannot remember what day it is whereas I used to be able to click off all the Sunday dates for months to come.

The calendar with the seasons; the liturgy with the respective celebrations – They gave structure to life along with familiar celebrations, songs, scripture, symbols and color – all of it creating life's mosaic with beauty and form. I did so love it and I miss it. The annual celebration of the Christian Year or Church Year came to be the most important calendar for me – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter and the season of Eastertide culminating in the Festival

of Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. The secular holidays couldn't hold a candle to those High Holy Days.

The fact that I could be so moved by the Kennedy Funeral Mass and celebration points to a major movement in my life and my religious experience. Like many of you I was raised in the tradition of the Protestant Reformation. Were I preaching today at CCC of old, the Reformation theme probably would have found expression unless we decided to celebrate the previous Sunday so as to keep today for All Saints. It was the Eve of All Saints that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenburg.

Halloween was really Hallowe'en –shortened for All Hallows' Even – the Eve of All Saints' Day –November 1. A web site, *History.com*, gives a history of the day which originated among the Celtic people in Ireland, Britain and Northern France 2000 years ago; it was their New Year celebration. By A.D. 43 the Romans had conquered those lands and in the course of the 400 years they ruled the Celtic Lands, they introduced two festivals of Roman origin which were combined with the traditional Celtic celebration of *Samhain* (pronounced sow-in). *Feralia* was a day in October which commemorated the passing of the dead and *Pomona*, the goddess of fruit and trees, was the second festival combined with *Feralia* to celebrate the Celtic New Year Samhain.

The current celebration on November 1 probably originates from the time of Pope Gregory III (d. AD 741) and was likely first observed on November 1 in Germany. There is some dispute about the history and earlier connections. As happened so often in the history of the church, a secular or cultural festival was “baptized” and given a Christian significance. The Pope was attempting to replace the Celtic festival of the dead with a related, but church-sanctioned holiday.

The celebration was also called All-hallows or All-hallowmas (from Middle English Alholowmesse meaning All Saints' Day) and the night before it, the night of Samhain, began to be called All-hallows Eve and, eventually, Halloween. Even later, in A.D. 1000, the church would make November 2 All Souls' Day, a day to honor the dead. It was celebrated similarly to Samhain, with big bonfires, parades, and dressing up in costumes as saints, angels, and devils. Together, the three celebrations, the eve of All Saints, All Saints, and All Souls, were called Hallowmas.

But, back to how Reformation Day and All Saints' Day point to a movement in my own religious experience – and because you were with me through this evolution, it has probably changed your religious experience as well. I never really reflected on the significance of the close connection between the celebration of Reformation Day and All Saints' Day. For me, in my nurture and training, the Reformation marked a turning from the Christian Year, the Liturgical framework, the celebration of the Mass, honoring and praying to saints, the vestments and the whole ambiance of worship space. As one silly example, in my early years of

ministry I would insist on a central pulpit – not a divided chancel with lectern on one side and pulpit on the other with the Communion table or “altar” central. Protestant Reformed worship was centered in the Word. Some of you may remember the earlier sanctuary, now the parlor, where the pulpit was centered and elevated while the Communion table was on the floor level below the pulpit. Architecture matters! When I returned here in 1971 the sanctuary had been redone. The pulpit was to the congregation’s left, the table raised to the chancel level with a worship center focus with cross and candles.

By now you may wonder why I’m making so much of this, but stay with me because I’m attempting to give a graphic picture of what was for us – for me as Pastor, you as people, a major shift in religious understanding and experience.

Moving from a strong celebration of Reformation Day to an increasingly significant celebration of All Saints’ Day charts a major movement in our worship life reflecting a major new perspective on the meaning of Christian worship. My experience - which I think I can say was our experience - was movement from the head to the heart. This is not to deny that there was “Heart” in traditional Reformed worship. Nonetheless, the address was to the mind, a rational, if passionate as well, exposition of the Scripture read through the lens of the Theological System.

As I reflect back over the years I remember one particular moment when the lights went on for me; it was an “aha moment.” I’m sure it was over 30 years ago. My dear friend, Herman Ridder, had been President of Western Theological Seminary in Holland. Soon after I returned here in 1971, “Bud” as I called him, left the seminary to pastor the Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids. We established a strong friendship, shared resources, and were in frequent contact. On one occasion he suggested we attend a continuing education event at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, a Presbyterian school. The theme was a fresh look at the Apostle’s Creed. At a Lutheran Seminary in the same complex of schools was a great theologian, Joseph Sittler, who led one of the sessions. I don’t remember what his specific topic was but I shall never forget one of his “throw away lines” – whatever point he was making, he looked at the group and said,

“You Presbyterians always go through the head. The Catholic tradition addresses all the senses. There is pageantry, fabric, color, incense, vestments, banners, candles, etc. They approach the whole person, not just the intellect.”

Well, it was one of those moments. I said to myself, “Oh, my goodness, he is right!” Nurtured in Reformed theology, the Heidelberg Catechism, the centrality of preaching, I suddenly realized how much the churches of the Reformation were in reaction against the Roman Church from which they separated. Of course, there was need for reform and renewal but, as is true of great institutions,

they don't bend easily or recognize the need to change until it's too late and there is brokenness, alienation and division. So it was in the 16th century.

The consequences of the break can be seen nowhere more clearly than in worship. Let me set that forth vividly by contrasting the worship life of the divided Body of Christ. The Roman Church continued with its Christian Year or Church Year, its festivals, its liturgy, its church architecture, symbols and vestments. And, in reaction, the Protestant tradition, in its Reformed expression, "cleansed" itself of all the accoutrements of the worship experience. And in its place? – the preaching of the Catechism.

The Heidelberg Catechism stemming from the 16th century (1563) is the most beloved and formative of the catechisms to arise in that era of Reformation. It consisted of 129 questions and answers divided up into 52 Lord's Days – one for each Sunday of the year.

When I was ordained in 1960, the requirement for a minister was to cover the points of doctrine contained in the Catechism once every four years. The Christian Reformed Church required the Catechism be handled annually. Reviewing it again I was struck by the careful delineation of the Christian faith as understood in the wake of the Reformation division of the church – understood by the reformers and set forth in very rational discourse with the precision of careful logic – it was indeed an intellectual document.

The first question and answer begins with a warm pastoral note:

"What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

The answer:

"That I with body and soul in life and in death am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ...."

Then Question 2:

"How many things are necessary for you to know that you may live and die happily?"

And the answer:

"Three things: First, the greatness of my sin and misery; second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and miseries; third, how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption."

There you have the outline of the Catechism. Question one and two comprise the first Lord's Day. Then follow the three divisions of the catechism – as someone has named them – guilt, grace and gratitude. In the first section our fallenness is set forth. The second part deals with our redemption through the atoning death of Jesus Christ whose death satisfies the demands of God's justice and also in this section the Apostle's Creed is explained. Section three sets forth a life of gratitude for salvation through a life of obedience and prayer – the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer being explicated. It is in this section in the treating of the

second commandment that I was struck by the flash point of the great divide between traditional Catholic worship and the worship of the newly emerged churches of the Reformation.

We find a fascinating question and answer concerning the second commandment “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath...”

Regarding the second commandment the catechism asks what God requires – the answer:

“We may not make any image of God...

No images at all?

No.

But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the laity?”

And here is the crux:

“No; for we should not be wiser than God, who will not have his people taught by dumb idols, but by the lively preaching of his word.”

With the distance of centuries and a pinch of objectivity it is easy to feel the negative tone of such an assertion. The Reformation movement certainly had various facets, but one obvious reaction was against the symbolic drama of the Catholic pageant of salvation as it was played out in the liturgical celebration of the Mass. In stark contrast to the richly symbolic, sensual Eucharistic drama was the church, barren and plain, dominated by a high pulpit from which was proclaimed the Word of God.

You may remember my experience which I’ve shared on several occasions. I was in Leiden where I had lived for four years. On a Saturday evening I visited one of the great old cathedral-like Protestant churches, the Hooglandse Kerk. It had recently been renewed in its interior. There was the High Pulpit attached to one of the great columns, folding chairs set up around it, an organ with pipes displayed – the only ornamental, though also functioning element in that vast white-washed space. It was clean and bright and sterile. Then I moved down the street and entered the one Catholic church in Leiden. It was like entering a warm womb – lighting was dim, candles glowed, windows of stained glass, the chancel with the altar the obvious center where the drama of the Mass was enacted.

Visiting those two churches in one evening was a striking visual and visceral experience of what Joseph Sittler had pointed to at the seminar at McCormick Seminary –

“You Presbyterians (Reformation folk) address the head. The Catholic tradition approaches the whole person through all the senses.”

About the time of that seminar, Mr. Bryson came to us as Director of Music and Fine Arts. In the beginning he was also directing the St. Mary’s music program and thus brought with him not only his own artistic sensitivity but the experience of the Catholic liturgy. Fortunately, Joseph Sittler had shocked my consciousness

about the nature of worship. In response to Sittler I remember as though it were yesterday saying to myself, “Why must one choose between ‘the lively preaching of the Word’ and the rich, sensual, liturgical experience as practiced in the Catholic Church?” From that moment I attempted to combine the best of the Reformation and Catholic worship. The result, in my not unbiased opinion, was a thing of beauty. Oh, there was some grumbling – the sermons were too long, there was too much music... Services so rich in their offerings couldn’t be pulled off in an hour! But for the most part I think we all agreed that we had found a formula for moving corporate worship experience which stimulated the mind and moved the heart. It consisted of intelligent articulation of Christian faith – its claim, its hope, its comfort and its challenge – wrapped in meaningful liturgical movement and artistic expression that created as aesthetic experience that elevated the soul.

To return to where I began, it was that movement in my understanding and sensitivity that caused me to watch the funeral celebration of Teddy Kennedy with rapt attention and deep emotion. While I was experiencing the moving of my own being, I was also aware of myself in the experience. I was so deeply aware that my heart dwells in the deep mystery of life, of living before the Sacred Mystery we call God. I was aware of how much I missed the liturgical framework of the Church Year that moved me through the seasons as we celebrated the life of Jesus – life from birth through ministry, passion, death and resurrection and the Spirit’s gathering of that Apostolic church community.

A lot going on there, you might say, but it was so and I think I know why that was so. It was because that whole funeral celebration from the entrance to the cathedral to the final committal was for me so rich in memory – memory of such deeply meaningful experience over many years. There were those who said my best preaching was at funerals and I will admit to the rather strange fact that funerals were my favorite time to preach. I think that is because there one is faced with life’s ultimate mystery, death, and I think the impulse to religion is probably fed by the fact that we shall all die. And again in the celebration of the Christian year we are brought face to face with our mortality.

Ash Wednesday was one of my favorite services. At Lent’s beginning, we were invited to begin a period of disciplined practice that would lead us to Holy Week – Good Friday and then Easter and the celebration of Resurrection.

You came down the aisle and we looked into your eyes and, as we placed on your forehead the ashes in the sign of the cross, we repeated the solemn words from the Genesis story of the fall of the human creature – solemn words of judgment:

“Dust thou art and to dust
thou shalt return.” (Genesis 3:19)

That’s how the story begins – Creation, the Garden, the test, failure and judgment. It is a story from ancient time stemming from the deep human

intuition that God is the Creative Source of all that is, that creation is good and yet there is misery. Why? Human hubris? How will the Creator respond? A sentence of death – Dust thou art; to dust thou shalt return.

Is there then no hope? Yes, there is for God has called a people to reverse the judgment; finally Grace will prevail.

Such a story! And it goes on. From that people God called emerges one, Jesus of Nazareth. Those who encountered him sensed they were in the presence of God. Offensive to established authority, he was crucified. Yet amazingly, those who knew and loved him experienced his presence; He is risen, they cried!

Such a story! Such a drama! And in the midst of it all was the urgent human question: Dust and nothing more? The Hebrew sage wondered. The *Ecclesiastes* writing from his pen articulates his wonderings, his questions.

In the wake of Jesus, St. Paul who had a blinding encounter with light and a vision and voice of the risen Jesus thought he knew where he was in the divine drama of creation's history. He was at the edge; the end was near. Death conquered in Jesus – the first fruits – would soon be universally defeated. Jesus enthroned in Heaven was engaged in a "mopping up" operation. The last enemy to be defeated was death and then all would be handed to God who would be "all in all."

Such a story! Such a drama!

There was concrete history here. Jesus was an historical figure. He was crucified. But then all of that was mixed with Israel's history, the prophetic expectation, the vision and hope of that people. But to separate fact and faith interpretation is quite impossible. It all became a Story – the Story of the emerging Jesus-Jewish movement and eventually of the Gentile Christian Church.

The Hebrew writer wondered about what happened to the human spirit. St. Paul "knew," "...If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." But, of course, he was wrong about history's time-table. Maybe he was speaking words of faith, of trust, but not words to be taken literally.

He was wrong too, I believe, about death being the last enemy. That view stemmed from the old Genesis myth of the "Fall" and, again those solemn words, "...to dust thou shalt return". But whether he had it right or not isn't really the point. Rather, he was combining all that his religious tradition had given him, in which his spiritual formation took place, and his own personal experience, and out of all that he created a story. And that story is a drama of life and death, of the source and ground and goal of our existence – issues of meaning, issues of ultimate questions.

Now go back to the Kennedy funeral – all of that was there – the biblical story – all of it. But it was woven into a tapestry, it was acted out as a drama, it pointed to that dimension of our existence that transcends the earthly, the rational, the empirical realm. And so it touches our depths, plays on our hopes, assuages our grief – offers assurance of Grace in the end.

It is claimed by many that our biblical story no longer fits the facts – that is, our present knowledge of our cosmic reality as it is emerging and our understanding growing. Quite true! Not perfection/fall/redemption ending in the Apolcalypse vividly portrayed in the final New Testament writing. Rather an emerging, evolving, expanding cosmic reality whose mysteries are being unlocked more and more. Those who wrestle with these things suggest we need a new story – “a likely story” because it will combine what we know with what we can only wonder about. And that is because finally there is Mystery: Mystery not about to be unraveled, “solved,” but Ultimate Mystery that will, I suspect, remain forever in a “cloud of unknowing.”

Come back once more to the two worship traditions – the ongoing Catholic tradition with its story wrapped in incense amidst flickering candles surrounding the body and blood of the Eucharistic sacrifice, and the 16th century emergent catechetical preaching of the Bible in rational discourse developed logically appealing to the intellect. Overdrawn? Perhaps, but also a profound insight into the parting of the ways symbolized by All Saints’ Day and Reformation Day.

I have no doubt what I choose. Thank God for that moment of clarity when the difference was pointed out as a difference of appealing to the head or to the whole person. Thank God, recognizing the Bible as story and thus allowing it to come alive in a drama, a pageant, did not mean abandoning the mind. But it did create a setting of sensitive, artistic expression that elevated the soul through aesthetic experience, that opened the mind and warmed the heart, readying the worshipping community to be moved in the depths and discover faith, hope and love in the presence of the Sacred Mystery whose presence was pointed to in song and dance, cross and candle, table and font.

Thank God we have shared memories of shared experience of being lost in wonder, love and praise. Yes, we miss it terribly, but we could not miss it had we not had such rich experience of celebrative worship in which head and heart were united in lifting us into the presence of that Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

PRAYER

O God,
to You we lift our souls,
to You we lift our hearts.

The Psalmist wrote of the deer panting for streams of living water and saw
himself mirrored in that thirst.

We, too, thirst for You, O Living God,
to know that You are;
to sense Your presence;
to rest in Your grace.

As your people gathered here in this place,
we would be still and know that You are God.

We bring our thanksgiving
in the conscious knowledge that all is grace

The order of creation –
we reset our clocks and watches
to catch a bit more light in the morning,
but Brother Sun and Sister Moon are affected not at all;
Summer and Winter, Springtime and Harvest
in passing parade proclaim Your great faithfulness.

You are a God we can count on,
keeping this vast cosmos balanced on a razor's edge,
just so, just right.

And we breathe;
planets move in marvelous symphony;
salmon swim upstream;
birds migrate to warmer climes;
trees, so recently so richly garbed
now poke heavenward bony fingers,
warning of winter storms gathering,
their leafy coats of dazzling color
now lying shredded on the ground.

And we sense a certain melancholy, a gentle grieving,
for once again we are rushing headlong toward the end of another year.
Like sand streaming through our fingers
is the passing of our lives,
and we seem paralyzed, failing to grasp it.

Where have the years of our lives gone,
O God,
where have they gone?
And what will become of us?
Ah, Dear God,
Creator, Lover of this world

in all the wonder of its diversity,
there is no shadow of turning in You.

You, the eternal God,
from Whom we have life,
to Whom our life returns,
in You we trust, in You we rest.
All is grace.
We give You thanks through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

For these moments, let us quiet our minds,
letting go of concerns that burden us,
regrets that cripple us,
fears that paralyze us,
whatever is troubling us.

Let us image that which causes gratitude to rise in us –
the gift and grace of life;
the sources of our joy;
those persons who make life rich.

Let us call to mind those images which have shaped us –
the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
the Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
the Lord is the strength of my life,
of whom shall I be afraid?

Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden,
and I will give you rest.
Since God is for us, who can be against us?
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.
All will be well, all will be well,
All manner of things will be well.

O God,
those words rise from our depths so naturally.
O God
it seems that, in moments like these
when we purposefully, intentionally turn to you
when we turn to whomever or whatever you are,
we do so almost with a sigh,
O God,

for we know we are now in the zone of Mystery.

There was something about Jesus when he prayed
that caused the disciples to plead,
Lord, teach us to pray.
we plead, as well,
O, God, teach us to pray.

Once, perhaps, we came as suppliants
to the Royal Throne of the Universe with requests
we must admit on reflection were very self-centered,
reflecting a very small universe in which
our hopes and fears loomed very large.
And still there are moments when we flee into your presence
totally occupied with our own concerns –
something that threatens us, or
some experience that crushes us, or
some potential happening that involves us in a loss
we fear would undo us.

And sometimes it is sheer joy, ecstasy, exhilaration
that bursts forth in a torrent of praise,
shutting out everything else for the moment.
But, more and more, we look not out there,
but somehow within, into our own depths,
sensing we are connected deep down, rooted in Being itself,
you being the inexhaustible Source and Ground of all that exists –
the good earth,
the starry heavens,
the oceans' tides
And ourselves, conscious, aware, groping for some clue
by which to know you, to rest in you,
no longer strangers, but at home in the universe,
at one with all that is.

Sacred Mystery of Being, of our lives,
it is so good, so familiar for us gathered here
to be gathered consciously in Your presence.
Such rich memories we share of days gone by.
O God,
how grateful we are for all we have shared,
for all we have experienced together –
grateful for friendship, for mutual trust, mutual caring, support and love.

On this All Saints' Day we remember those we've loved and lost awhile.
We are grateful, O God, for the confidence with which we live and die,

that to live is to live unto the Lord
and to die is to die unto the Lord
and therefore whether we live or whether we die,
we are the Lord's.

We are grateful, O great Mystery of life,
that we have been graced with a fundamental trust
that this cosmic dance into which our lives are woven
is not a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,
but a universe whose grain is love,
whose end is life and light,
a cosmos exploding before our eyes
with marvels our forbears would not believe
and we can hardly begin to comprehend.

O God
Our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Grant us joy and peace as in You
we live and move and have our being,
confident we will never walk alone.

Amen