Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Festival of All Saints

November 4, 2018

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THE COMMUNITY OF ETERNAL LIFE John 11:32–44

I can think of no service that is more moving and poignant than this one. In recalling the names of those who have gone before us, both the names of those who have inspired all of humanity, and the names of those who are written upon our hearts, we participate in an ancient ritual celebrating the Festival of All Saints.

As for those whose names are written upon our hearts, we remember them with love and gratitude. We remember them as human beings who can never be replicated. They were unique and “one of a kind.” Each of them had a physical appearance that belonged only to them. Each of them had gifts that were unmatched by anyone else. Each of them had a special place in our lives. And now they have died. They are gone from us.

This leads me to the first thing I want to say on this Sunday, and I don’t expect that all of you will agree with me. But I must say what is upon my heart. And what I want to say is this. There is nothing in all the doctrines of the Christian faith, no matter how beautifully stated, that can ever really answer the questions that arise in the face of the deaths of those unique human beings who have been loved by us. There are simply no answers. Death is a reality not easily addressed by us or by our faith.

Now, death is a reality we may not think of all the time, but it is never far from us, and today, we are all too aware that human life has a beginning and an end. These, our loved ones, were born and they have died.

Conventional Christianity wants to cover over the reality of death. We say that someone has “passed” as if death is but a transition from one form of life to another. Or we say that the body may pass away, but not the soul of a person, which is immortal. But that does a disservice to the body, and when we think about it, our physical presence is the way we experience one another. In many churches, the word “death is never mentioned in memorial services.

But death is a reality that needs to be faced by us. Otherwise we will have nothing to say about this reality with which we live. Otherwise, we will have a difficult time facing our own deaths.

Even Jesus was born and he died. He was born in Nazareth and he died on Golgotha. The ancient creed says it boldly. Referring to Jesus, it says that he was crucified, dead, and buried. Jesus died as we all die.

We dare not overlook the reality of death. We are aware of it in this service. Each time we called out a name, there was a deep-seated feeling inside us, especially if the one we named died recently. Tears may have come to our eyes. We know. This person has gone from us. Oh yes, we may be filled with gratitude for the one whom we loved, but gratitude does not wipe out the sadness we feel.

Death is not only a problem for us; it was also a problem for the early Christian community. The members of that community were expecting Jesus to return within their life times, but he did not return, and they began to experience the deaths of their fellow Christians. How were they to respond to this new reality? How was death to be regarded in the community of eternal life? These are the questions underlying the story of the raising of Lazarus. The story reflects our human tendency to avoid the reality of death. Jesus says that Lazarus has fallen asleep, meaning that he has indeed died. But the disciples, as usual, misunderstand. They say, “If he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus then has to clarify the situation. He says, plainly, “Lazarus is dead.” Mary and Martha both complain to Jesus that if he had been present, Lazarus would not have died. In fact, Lazarus is dead and has been in a tomb for four days, and when they open up the tomb, we are told that there was a stench. The death of Lazarus was real, just as the deaths of those we have loved were real deaths.

Remember, I began by saying that there is nothing in all the doctrines of our Christian faith, no matter how beautifully stated, that can ever really answer the questions that arise in the face of the deaths of those unique human beings who have been loved by us. Yet, in the second place, I want to also want to say something of equal weight, and it is this. There is nothing in Christian faith that should ever underestimate the capacity of the human spirit and the capacity of the divine Spirit to help us meaningfully face and absorb death- even our own deaths. Against the terrible reality of death, there is something in us, and something inspired in us by God’s spirit, that enables us to face death with faith and courage.

We need only call on the witness of the saints whom we remember this day. It has been my privilege as a pastor to be with many people in the last days of their lives, and with two members of my own family whom I loved very much. Aided by the Holy Spirit and their own spirits, these persons I knew and loved had the capacity to die with dignity and gratitude and with incredible faith and hope. This is their witness to us.

They died in the strength of faith and hope. Now faith and hope are not guarantees of eternal life. As Douglas John Hall reminds us, faith is not sight and hope is not fulfillment. And yet, the Christian knows that just as God created the earth out of nothing, God can also bring forth life from death, and that just as Jesus called Lazarus forth from his tomb, God can grant us newness of life in the midst of death. But this is something we can only affirm by faith. We have no sight to back up our affirmation. We have no fulfillment to rely upon and so we can only live in hope. Faith and hope do not allow us to die with any kind of certainty as to the kind of life that God will give us in death. But faith and hope do enable us to trust that all will be well in the end.

And so death is a reality in our lives and in the life of our community that is not easily answered, but we are also a people of faith and hope, and the Holy Spirit enables us to face death and absorb the reality of death into our own lives. And so we approach this Festival of All Saints not only with a measure of sadness, but also with the courage and strength that comes from our faith and our hope. We say: yes, we belong to a community of eternal life, and that there is nothing in life or death that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God.