



Lessons from the Saints

Feast of All Saints || November 3, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Proper 26B || Wisdom 3:1-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

I am so pleased to share our first Feast of All Saints together. This is among the church's most important feast days, and as you may know, not every parish celebrates it every year. It is my intention that we will always set aside the first Sunday in November to reflect on our forebearers and honor our loved ones who have preceded us in death so that we may attend to our own grief. My prayer is that eventually, over the years to come, acute grief will evolve and its sharp edges will soften, and each of us will be comfortable in the assurance that our grief – in all of its forms belongs here.

Our rituals surrounding death and grief are such important parts of our shared faith. We believe that we are temporarily separated by death. As is our custom, we are often caught up in the details of funeral planning and making arrangements shortly before or upon the death of our loved ones. It is a time where for some that planning is a welcome distraction, while others may be overwhelmed or unavailable for funeral or memorial details.

Friends and surviving members of our support circles do their best to console us and offer words of comfort, but if you are like me, sometimes those can be handled by rote. We reply with polite gratitude, which is genuine, but not well considered. In the throes of fresh grief the mundane details of daily life can feel foreign or even insulting.

I remember shortly after the death of my much loved and larger than life mother, I was driving somewhere and was shocked to see that people were going about their daily lives – I was most struck by the fact that people were grocery shopping. It made no sense to me! My mother's passing was neither sudden nor premature, but it was the fact of her absence from my daily life that brought me up short. I am beyond blessed to have a sister I could call up – as I did nearly every day for months and months, and I would begin the conversation with,

“I’m so sorry, I heard that your Mother died”, which always elicited the comforting response, “Oh my goodness, I heard that YOUR Mother died”. Somehow this company in the trenches of grief and the valley of death were always comforting, and allowed each of us eventually to say silly things to one another like, “well, I understand that Mum was sick of your cooking and was desperate to escape it” or “she said she was exhausted from trying to dazzle all the people at the senior center, so she thought she’d give the company of heaven a try”. Humor helped seal in some of the cracks that had fractured our broken hearts.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience with death and grief? Those of you who have had to grapple with sudden and tragic deaths have a host of other complicated feelings to incorporate or manage in order to keep going each day. If you have a sibling, dear friend or someone you can call for comfort or for a grief check-in, I highly recommend it! Grief can be such an isolating or lonely experience and part of today’s celebration is to remind us that it needn’t be. Each one of you has a priest who welcomes the privilege to walk any part of this challenging human experience together. (Calls, texts, e-mail and visits – open invite to each of you).

This holiday, the Feast of All Saints is our church’s invitation to level the playing field and to offer an intentional time to remember and grieve for our missing loved ones. There is no preparation required, no special clothes or invitations to sort through. We are here and we give thanks for the Communion of Saints. We join together to honor the saints who were responsible for the creation of the St. Andrew’s community, or were dedicated to its rebuilding in the 1980s and ‘90s. Those people who invested their time, talent and treasure to the continuation and availability of St. Andrew’s as a shared sacred place – a place to celebrate, grieve, worship and learn. Today we give thanks for their wisdom and foresight, for the shoulders we are privileged to stand upon as we look forward to the next hundred years of this community here gathered.

Perhaps we are comforted by the sure and certain knowledge that we will one day be reunited with these foundational souls. We have an Episcopal calendar of Holy Women and Holy Men who have not only predeceased us, but have made their own, indelible marks on our shared faith. They have each left us a rich inheritance - demonstrated a new and different way to express love for one another, for our community, or underrepresented siblings in Christ. They have dedicated their lives to improving our understanding of how to walk in Love as Christ Loved us.

Please take today’s invitation to remember your loved ones – those whose names we will pray in a few minutes and those who may not be named, but have made an indelible mark on your own lives.

Today is the day we grieve equally and are reminded of the grief that Jesus expressed when he heard his beloved friend Lazarus had been sick and died. Jesus wept. That human and vulnerable connected response to life's frailty and grief. Jesus wept.

Perhaps the grief you carry evokes tears, or anger at things unresolved. Perhaps you experience your grief wrapped in relief for the end of a loved one's earthly suffering. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, yet as Episcopalians, we set aside one special Sunday a year to examine and attend to our own personal grief. We are guided by the example set by Jesus, and we are reminded that grief of every sort is welcome in this sacred space. The hard, human, breaking experience of grief at the death of a loved one is literally among the experiences that binds us together each and every Sunday as we approach the altar table for Communion. We remember the death and grief that surrounded Jesus who was a son, a brother, a friend and a dearly beloved companion. We know that his death sent waves of grief and fear across communities and nearly decimated his disciples.

Each Sunday at the Communion table we are also reminded of the joy and promise that his resurrection offers to each of us. Death is not the final word, and all of the feelings, experiences and longing that this temporary state evokes belongs here. Each and every Sunday, and especially this All Saints morning.

This morning we are invited to honor our Saints, to be gentle with our hearts as we remember the people who have shaped us, loved us and are responsible for some important parts of who we are. It is a gift to honor those memories with you and to gather in celebration of our saints and as an annual opportunity to examine and soothe our grief-struck or grief-shaped souls. Amen+