

November 4, 2018

All Saints' Day

The Sixth Stage of Grief

John 11:32-44

Opening words: Today, we observe All Saints' Day. The actual date of All Saints' Day is November 1. Do you remember the story? I gave it to you last week. All Saints' Day was created by Pope Boniface IV. He wanted the church martyrs to be remembered. The first All Saints' Day was observed on May 13, 609. Later, it was moved to November 1 to try to overshadow Halloween. It didn't work. However, that does not mean that All Saints' Day isn't important. It is important to remember those whom we have lost. In the past twelve months, we have welcomed fifteen new members to Western Reserve. Sadly, we have lost fourteen to death.

May we never forget:

Elaine Dovala
Terry James
Carol Thomas
Ken Williamson
Larry Grist
Peg Wilkes
Russ Moore
Lois Fellers
Janet McHenry
Jannette Ruse
Joann Pentz
Greg Oswald
Chuck Hill
Richard Tolle

This morning we are instructed from the Gospel of John. It was written by the disciple John, "the one whom Jesus loved." However, his name is never mentioned in the Gospel. Aware of the Jewish lifestyle and opinions, John wrote to a Greek-thinking audience toward the end of the first century. He wrote to correct certain common heresies, and he wrote to proclaim the name of Jesus. There is no doubt about it. John believed, Jesus was the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah. He longed to share the abundant life in Jesus Christ. This Gospel stands alone. It is different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. The storyline is different, but the ending is the same. In the end, Jesus dies and is resurrected. What else really matters? Our scripture reading for today is John 11:32-44. Let me call this message *The Sixth Stage of Grief*.

John 11:32-44 ³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Norman Cousins (1915-1990) was an American political journalist, author, professor, and world peace advocate. He once said, "*Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.*" I know that quote is correct because I have witnessed it many times. If you have witnessed that quote at least once, say, "**Amen!**"

Today, we find ourselves in the eleventh chapter of John. This is the last story, prior to Holy Week. In many ways, it sets up Holy Week. The chapter begins in sadness. Bethany is one and a half miles to the east of Jerusalem. It was the home of three siblings, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The chapter begins in sadness. Lazarus is gravely ill. The name Lazarus means "whom God helps" or "God has helped." His name is prophetic. Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha, reach out to Jesus for help. They know he has the power to save their brother. They were two of Jesus's big supporters. Yet, when Jesus hears about Lazarus's condition, he stays away for two extra days. It appears at first that Jesus has waited too long. When the Master arrives in Bethany, he is told Lazarus has died. John goes out of his way to tell us, Lazarus has been dead for four days. That fact is important, because many Jews believed the soul remained near the corpse for three days and abandoned hope of it returning on the fourth. Some things don't change. The grieving sisters are surrounded by family and friends. A short time later, Jesus tries to comfort them. The scene is heart breaking and emotional. The women are crying and soon Jesus, himself, is crying. But, like all emotions, they pass quickly. Jesus is taken to Lazarus's tomb. He requests the stone be rolled away from the entrance, letting the odors escape. After Jesus prays, he calls to Lazarus and the once dead man walks out. He is not one of the walking dead, a zombie. He had returned from the dead, and he

became the greatest witness of his day. The story of the resurrection of Lazarus reminds us there is always hope. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Years ago, I was introduced to a book written by Elizabeth Kubler Ross, *On Death and Dying*. If you have never read it, I would encourage you to do so. It has helped many grieving people through the years. The concept is simple. When death invades our personal space, we naturally go through five stages. You know the truth. Grieving is a complex topic for several reasons. First, everyone grieves differently. In other words, you do not grieve the same as the person sitting next to you. Second, the same individual will grieve differently because every relationship in our lives is different. You will grieve differently for your spouse of many years, than you will for a high school friend you haven't seen in years. However, everyone does have one thing in common. Everyone passes through these five stages of grief. Some rush through a stage, others stay at a stage for a while. However, it is important for you to get through all five to resume your life. If you do not pass through each stage, then you stop living on the day your loved one dies. So, what are the five stages of grief?

- 1. Denial** – Even when death is expected, it is a shock. It is a numbness. You just can't believe the person is gone. You thought they would always be there, but you were wrong. Recently, I worked with a woman who continued to text her deceased fiancé, and she wondered why he didn't respond. She was in denial. Have you ever been in denial when a loved one died?
- 2. Anger** – At some point the emotions kick in, and the person becomes angry. Powerlessness is pointed outward and someone must be blamed. How many examples do you need? The doctor made a fatal mistake. The pharmacist gave him the wrong pill. The hospital is incompetent, or the family was inattentive. I wonder how many hospitals have been sued in the last year? I wonder how many doctors have been sued in the last year? People sue for many reasons. One of those reasons is anger. Have you ever been angry when a loved one dies?
- 3. Bargaining** – Sometimes, before death comes, we bargain with God. If my loved one is healed, I will spend the rest of my life serving you. Sometimes, after death comes, we bargain with God. We find bargaining in those "if only" statements. If only they would have found the tumor earlier. If only we would have recognized the illness earlier. If only he would have driven down a different road, then the accident would never have happened. Do you hear what you are trying to do? We want life to return to what it was; we want our loved one restored. Have you ever found yourself bargaining when a loved one dies?
- 4. Depression** – When the bargaining ends, the depression begins. In this case, depression is not a mental illness, it is an appropriate response to a great loss. In many ways, we withdraw from life. Have you ever felt depressed when a loved one dies?

5. Acceptance – I explain it this way: We never really get over the death of a loved one, but we do adjust. Things will never be normal again, but you will find a new normal. Maybe acceptance isn't the right word? Maybe surrender is? How many times in your life have you been forced to accept the death of a loved one?

In the Christian faith, there is a sixth stage to grief. The sixth stage of grief is hope. In the Gospel lesson for today, Mary and Martha were devastated. They were stuck at the second stage, anger. If Jesus would have been there, then Lazarus would have been healed. But Jesus was absent, so he died. They forgot that with Jesus there is always hope.

During this calendar year, I have officiated at thirty-eight funerals, thirteen from this church. Each one of those funerals ended with these words. Perhaps, you remember them on your sad day.

Jesus was born in the ordinary way, yet he lived an extraordinary life. He never committed a single sin. He deserved to live an extra long life, but it didn't happen. He was executed as a young man. Once dead, Jesus's friends came to pay their final respects. Those who came early in the morning, to get the horrible job done, made the great discovery. The tomb was empty! Somehow, Jesus had come back to life. I have never been able to explain how the resurrection happened, because I can't explain a miracle. However, I do know the resurrection of Jesus changed everything. It is the cornerstone of our faith, and it changed the way you are experiencing today. Without the resurrection of Jesus, it is over with the benediction or the lunch. However, with the resurrection, there is so much more.

When I was young, my mother always told me to tell the truth. She knew I wasn't too bright, and she knew it would be hard for me to remember all the lies. She said, telling the truth is easier. For this reason I have always told the truth, even if the truth is hard to hear. Someone once asked me the question, what do you look forward to in your own death? I don't think about my death too often, but I gave them an honest answer. I bet, my answer is your answer. When I die, I look forward to seeing all those people who have gone on ahead of me. I think the person was disappointed in my answer. They wanted me to say, "singing in the choir". There is no way. They wanted me to say, "standing at the throne". The problem is, I am too hyperactive. When I get to heaven, I long to see the people who have passed ahead of me, people I have missed for a long time. Can I ask you a question? Who do you want to see when you get to heaven? Who is the first person you want to see when you get to heaven? If there is someone you long to see, say, **"Amen!"** It going to be a great reunion, thanks to our resurrected Lord and Savior, Jesus!

Do you remember what Norman Cousins once said? He said, *"Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**