

Sermon: October 30, 2016 – Ephesians 1: 11-18
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore – Rev. Greg Wooley

This year, within our 125th Anniversary commemorations, this week has been set aside as “All Souls Week,” a time to honour our ancestors in the faith and to discuss a topic most of us would rather avoid: the topic of death. We may want to avoid it, but as Friday night’s speaker, Dr. Peter Nichol pointed out, “the death rate in Canada is one per person”, so it’s a good thing for us to talk about. My thanks to Jan Tissandier, to John Thorburn, and to everyone else who has contributed to this ambitious, well-structured opportunity to engage a difficult topic.

This morning I want to stay on-topic, by talking about the role of the Church when faced with the reality of death.

British pastor Paul Sheppy says this about the connection between the Church and the bereaved: “Death is consuming in its urgency... Other priorities are set aside, and attention is forced, like it or not, upon the immediacy of what has occurred. The angry, the dazed, the relieved, the numb – all look for help; and when they seek that help from the Christian people of God, they expect to receive all the compassion that our humanity commands. God in Christ calls us to offer more.”

Dr. Sheppy is quite correct in asserting that we have much more to offer, and more required of us, than an initial blush of compassion. The most immediate tool at our disposal, as we seek to express gratitude for the life of the deceased, and comfort for those who mourn, is, of course, the Bible. Although many of its words seem focused on correcting human behaviour – in particular, our propensity to ignore the needs of the poor – the Bible is also filled with words of hope. Readings like the one we heard this morning, with words like *hope, praise, glory, truth, salvation, belief, promise, redemption* and *inheritance* jumping off the page, need to be proclaimed in our times of sorrow.

But other emotions need to be engaged, too, when a loved one has died. In addition to words of hope, and confidence that eternal life does continue beyond death, there are the laments of the Psalms, the wise words of Ecclesiastes, the lessons gained from the preaching and healings and sufferings and resurrection of Christ Jesus. For me, the goal of the funeral sermon, is to express both what we are thankful for in the life of the person who has died, and the interplay between their story and God’s overall story. I’ll be saying more about that later, but for now I’ll just express gratitude that the Bible such a broad emotional range, connecting in so many ways with the overall theme and shape of our lives.

So as Christians we have compassion, and authentic words of hope...and we need to offer more.

We need to offer safe space where all the hard questions can be asked, a safe space where people can bring all those grief stages that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross outlined in her classic book, “On Death and Dying:” denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, not necessarily in that order, not necessarily just one time through. Those who have been hit with a loss need to know that their hurt can be expressed honestly, and not confined to fit a safe, polite and acceptable pattern. As I meet with families to begin funeral plans, I hope I am able to offer at least a bit of permission for the mourners to say what they need to say and feel what they need to feel; and when we have more public times, like this year’s “All Souls Week” program, we provide even more “safe space.”

As Christians, then, we have compassion, words of hope, and an intention to create safe space... and we need to offer even more.

We need to encourage brave, loving, supportive community that will not go away when the going gets tough. Depending on the relationship the bereaved and their family had with the Church prior to the death, we as Church may or may not be the primary support network. When we are the support network, we need to remind ourselves that grief can take years – it’s not over and done in a couple of weeks. When we are not the natural support network for a family, then it’s my task to connect those who mourn, with those who can authentically support them: to encourage their support network to offer practical assistance and open emotional space in the coming weeks, and to encourage the bereaved to take advantage of those supports.

I would be remiss if I did not mention one trend that really concerns me, and it’s a growing trend to not have a service or gathering of any sort when someone dies. We’ve all seen the notes in the paper – “at the request of the deceased there will be no memorial service.” While I think this often emanates from a

desire to keep people from being sad, or not having them make a fuss over you, it effectively cuts off the mourners from all the good things we've talked about this morning. It doesn't have to be a funeral – but in order to keep mourners from a state of perpetual, unresolved grief, there's got to be a *something*.

For us as a Church, for me in a covenant of Ministry with you, our response to death is a place where we embody the truth of our United Church Creed: that **in life, in death, in life beyond death, we are not alone**. By offering kindness and compassion; by speaking of God's unfailing love even in the midst of hardship and death; by naming and creating a safe space for the intense emotional world of grief; and by ongoing attentiveness to those who grieve, we demonstrate that God does not, will not, leave us alone in our times of grief and loss.

Each case is different, but I think that's a fair portrayal of the role of the Church when faced with the reality of death. But that's only the first part, because so far this morning, we've been looking only at what happens when a loved one dies. But what about my own mortality? The Church has a huge role to play, in ensuring that we engage our own mortality, not just attend to the needs – and again, I thank the "All Souls Week" crew for placing this discussion before us.

One of the very strange learnings for me, in being in the Ministry, then out of the Ministry, then back in the Ministry again, is that the more I am around death, the more comfortable I am with it; and the less I am in the presence of death, the more likely I am to fear it. The first time I was in the room when a parishioner died, I was 22 years old – yet even with that up-close experience over more than thirty years, I don't find it easy to dig deep for what I believe about death.

French Priest, Paleontologist and Philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin memorably stated that "we are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience" and that, I think, is a very healthy and helpful starting point. Life is a great thing, and to be enjoyed each day because it really doesn't last all that long. Within our physical life is love and beauty and creativity and joy, which enliven our days to such an extent that they are bigger than life. When we are in the presence of love and beauty and creativity and joy, we are grasping and in the grasp of the everlasting life promised by Christ.

Going one step further along this line of thought, God has in recent months been presenting me with a new understanding of the way that the life we live is connected to this everlasting, abundant life. It's based on the power of story, and the way that my little story intertwines with God's great big story.

"Story" is one of those loaded words that can mean very different things to different people. In the household I grew up in, if you were "telling a story" it meant you were telling a lie or, at best, a "tall tale." But in my twenties, as I came to learn more about other cultures, places where storytelling is the most important way that truth is conveyed from one generation to another, "story" stopped being about make-believe, and started to be a word about revealing what was really there. Learning the truth through the power of story, is very much an act of "seeing with the eyes of the heart."

Over the years, I have come to believe more and more that the power of scripture is inseparable from the power of story. The story of creation in Genesis, for example, holds power for me not because of six creative days that I am to take literally, but because of God's pleasure in all that was created. The parting of the Red Sea to allow safe passage for the children of Israel is a divisive, punitive account if taken literally, but if taken as story it tells of God's commitment to deliver the enslaved from all that oppresses them. And while I do happen to believe in a literal resurrection of Jesus Christ, I know that for many United Church folk the power of that story rests not in its literal factuality, but in its message that God's love is capable of lifting us, time and again, above the death-denying forces that try to put us in our place. Throughout these stories of the Bible there is this wonderful narrative thread, of God's timeless love being expressed in many ways, in many places, in many lives.

For quite some time, I've carried this understanding of God's eternal presence as an unfolding story, and for years in my practice of leading funerals have tried to tease out the core story of that person's life. But what is new for me, is bringing this right home, and starting to understand my own life as story - a story that is still being written, a small story that is directly connected to God's big story of infinite love.

In some chapters of my story, the theme of God's love being appreciated and expressed is strong; other chapters are dominated by my own willfulness or worry; most chapters are a bit of both. There is comedy,

there is tragedy, there is defeat and triumph, there's even romance! And as I survey my story thus far I realize that my story is no more real, and no less real, than the God-story I relate to. God's glorious big story, and my modest little story, are made of the same stuff. And when viewed that way, there's quite a bit less fear when considering death, for it's just the chapter where my story and God's story become as one.

One year ago, I came across a quote from a retired African-American pastor in Washington DC named Dr. H. Beecher Hicks: "The task for us...**is not to see God in our stories but to imagine our story in God's, learning somehow to see our humanity in divinity.**" I've referred to this quote a few times since then but to be honest, I could have included it just about every Sunday because it keeps on saying more and more to me.

I love this notion, of seeing our stories in God's story. It acknowledges the dynamic nature of God – God isn't portrayed as some far-off, unconcerned deity who only shows up now and then, but rather is the very theme of life. I love the idea, that my life is an unfolding process and so is God's. In 1st John, chapter 4, picked up in the words of our first hymn today**, we are told that God is love, and love is of God, that love is the narrative thread of God's life – the narrative thread picked up by my life, when I embrace God and am embraced by God.

Each of us will have our own view of life, death, and life beyond death. These views will be shaped by a huge range of influences:

- ✓ by the families we grew up in,
- ✓ by our up-close experiences of death,
- ✓ by popular culture,
- ✓ by Biblical writings of life eternal and abundant,
- ✓ by Biblical yearnings for a new realm ushered in by Christ,
- ✓ by reports from folks who have had near-death experiences,
- ✓ by the influence of other faiths and philosophies,
- ✓ or perhaps you believe this life is all there is.

However we embrace our mortality is one of those areas where our finite human capacity struggles to describe invisible realities of spirit. We may well be "spiritual beings on a human journey" but that doesn't make it any easier to figure out what it all means. It does mean, that this human journey is to be treasured, and enjoyed, and shared, as something deeply connected to our life of spirit.

For those of you who feel quite settled in your views of life and death and life beyond death, I give thanks for that. For those of you who are quite unsettled in these matters, I offer you the same supports we spoke of relative to those who grieve: compassion in your struggle; the hopeful encouragement of scripture; permission to engage whatever emotions arise, and a safe place to work that out; and the support of a congregation full of people who are trying to figure out the same things you are.

For all who are pondering the shape of our own mortality, may our thoughts and lives always be safely held by the loving power of the Holy. For all who are still weighed down by grief, may that burden be lightened. And may we feel the love of the One who has created and is creating, whose love is experienced in reconciliation and new beginnings, whose story meets our story each time we are kind and generous to others. At life's beginnings and endings and all the in-betweens, may all here gathered, know the embrace of human care and holy love. Amen.

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