

## **Remembering with Hope**

Hebrews 10:11-25 by Patty Friesen (Nov. 18/18)

Hebrews 10 reminds us about the work of Christ to reconcile us to God and the Holy Spirit's sealing the love of God in our hearts and minds that we may live in a hopeful way, encouraging those around us. It is with this confidence that God holds our lives and death that we can courageously remember the deaths of our loved ones these next two Sundays. In our faith, November is the month for remembering those who have died. That may sound morbid in our death denying culture but Christian churches know it is healing and freeing to remember our loved ones, even if it is painful as well.

The liturgical churches begin with All Saints Day on the first Sunday of November where they remember heroes in the faith. Then we have Remembrance Day where we remember those who have died in war, soldiers and civilians. Our Anabaptist tradition remembers Toten Sonntag or Memorial Sunday on the last Sunday of November before the start of Advent. That's a lot of death but I daresay unless we speak into the painful realities of the deaths of our loved ones, we will be forever frozen in our grief and that will freeze everything else in our life. From experience, I can say that if we are feeling unexplainably tired all the time and sad, and struggling with work and our most intimate relationships, there is unattended grief behind what we are going through. My hope is that we can begin to talk about the deaths of our loved ones and our grief and begin to find freedom for our souls and our ability to serve others. It may be helpful for us and for our loved ones to think about what we'd find comforting in our own deaths and in our funerals.

Death and funerals are the important theological statements about what we believe about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Funeral sermons need to be the best sermons we ever hear. They are the most important opportunities we have pastorally to preach hope and comfort and making sense of death. We've all heard enough bad funeral sermons, unfortunately, wasted opportunities for families and communities. When I don't know the person who has died, it's up to family to tell the story of their life but it's my job to remind us of God's character and presence with us in the loss.

In his memoir *Confessions of a Funeral Director*, Caleb Wilde talks about his life-changing encounter with death and a new vision of God. Even though he was a third generation funeral director, Caleb collapsed one day from spiritual exhaustion.

"It wasn't my closeness with death that was destroying me, it was how I viewed it. I saw death as a certain kind of darkness that needed religion and some degree of flat-out denial to make it ever so slightly lighter and brighter. We paint God as having no need, a God who is immortal, not mortal like us, who isn't dependent on others and who can stand alone unhurt and untouched by relationships. In a word, God has no vulnerability. If we are ashamed that we are mortal because of our view of a perfect God, wouldn't it be interesting if instead of a perfect God, we talked about a God who was vulnerable? Wouldn't it be interesting if vulnerability lies at the very core of God? What if we talked about a God who stands, maybe even kneels, with us in weakness and vulnerability. If God is really love, if God sees us and feels with us; it means that at God's core is this vulnerability, an interdependence that allows God to feel our pains, to know our sorrows and our joys. Maybe it's okay to have sorrow. Maybe it's okay to

weep. It's okay to be vulnerable, for when we do so, we aren't becoming unlike God, we are, in fact, (becoming more like Jesus)." (P. 79, 93-94 Confessions).

Jesus provides a vulnerable human grieving portrait of God and the gospel stories of Jesus with Lazarus and Jesus with the children and Jesus on the cross provide a true picture of a God who comforts us in our sufferings and sorrow, not a God who is above and separate from our experience.

When I last saw funeral director Katrina Funk at Marge Braun's funeral, I said, we need to talk about death more and our grief journeys after the deaths of our loved ones. She said, I agree. She said, I send out condolences and readings about the grief journey at the 3, 6 and 12 month anniversaries of the deaths of our clients' loved ones. Fantastic, I said. I said, I wish instead of rushing to Humboldt Strong after that horrific accident, we could have held Humboldt Sad for at least 30 official days of mourning or a year of mourning as some cultures practice. We don't allow sad. We think we have to be strong and somehow by-pass the grief process. She said she thought so much of our addictions and anger were about our denial of our grief: grief suppressed that turns into depression and outward rage. I love Katrina Funk. She gets death and grief and she's going to do my funeral! It will be easy for her. I've got the whole thing already planned with poetry, songs and chocolate brownies for the lunch.

While I may have some control over my funeral planning, I may have less control over my actual death but I do have some ideas about how I want that to go as well. As I have attended the deaths of many elders over this past decade of chaplaincy and ministry, I realize if I am able to age well, I will likely pass away in long term care or in St. Paul's Palliative Care. Besides Patrick being there, because he is younger than me

and will hopefully outlive me, I'd like a chaplain to be there so Sask Health better reinstate spiritual care in public hospitals by the time I get to be 90 years old! Besides Patrick and the chaplain, I'd like a few young people I've mentored at Osler Mennonite to be there - Terri Lynn, Stephanie, the Stefaniuk clan and others and I want them to sing me into heaven. I've got a list of the songs I want so they can start practicing.

It has been helpful for me to articulate what I want in my passing and Patrick says it is helpful for him too so he's not left wringing his hands and wondering what to do. He knows who to call and what they need to do.

Caleb Wiebe in Confessions of a Funeral Director describes how we care for ourselves in the deaths of our loved ones. He encourages death sabbaths, where families take a week after a death to not go to work or school and to focus on loss, tears, pain, needs, tiredness, silence, laughter, love and each other as a necessity of healthy self-care. We all grieve differently and there is no right or wrong way. What death asks of us is to pause. It doesn't tell us what we need to do when we pause because there may be nothing to do at all but it asks us to be in its presence. To sit with it. Listen to it. To embrace the death moment. Death sits at the heart of what it means to be human and we may just find ourselves when we practice death sabbaths.

We keep our loved ones alive in our thoughts and actions by active remembering - being intentional in remembering their death days as we would remember their birthdays and by telling the stories of their death even if they were difficult and sad just as we tell the stories of our children's births because these deaths and births are the most significant moments of the lives of the living. We remember our loved ones favourite foods and favourite activities. We wear their clothes and use their

cookware and tools. We hopefully talk about them and use their names even though others may be reluctant to do so.

May we not be afraid to lean into what death and our loved ones who die teach us. Let death show us goodness. Let death break us open, not break us apart. Let death make us pause, and reflect, meditate and take inventory of our life. Let death show us what is good about our life in the here and now and appreciate that. Let us embrace the silence that death creates. Let death invite us to be more patient with our family members and ourselves and we learn, grow and overcome. Let us lean into our communities that surround us in death and appreciate our relationships in these times. Let us in death, find love for those we may otherwise dislike. Let us practice active remembering, acknowledging that the dead never truly leave those they loved. Let us embrace death, realizing that the closer we become to our mortality; the more we confront death, the more we can embrace life.

Next Sunday is Memorial Sunday we will hear poetry of lament and hope and light candles in memory of our loved ones. Let us pray...Our loving God who creates us, forming us in the womb, holding our entire life and who draws us near again in death. Thank you that we experience who you are most profoundly in the deaths of our loved ones - these difficult but sacred moments when they return to you, their loving Creator. Be near to us as well to comfort us in these days of remembrance and give us hope. Amen.