

Dia de los Muertos
Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie
October 26, 2008

CALL TO WORSHIP

Adapted from the words of A. Powell Davies

Let us be honest with death.
Let us not pretend that it is less than it is.
It is separation. It is sorrow. It is grief.
But let us neither pretend that death is more than it is.
It is not an end to love –
for our need for love is boundless.
It is not an end to joy and laughter –

Let us be honest with death, for in that honesty
we will understand death better
and ourselves more deeply.

It is a sacred time, this. Let us begin our sacred time together, by rising in body or in spirit
to be lead in song with a medley . . .

MEDLEY Sing Swing Low, Sweet Chariot / When the Saints Come Marching In

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this Intergenerational Service that celebrates Dia de los Muertos, Day of the Dead. As you can see, we are celebrating the Mexican version of this holiday, but let it be known that cultures across the world and since the beginning of time have had many different versions. The Celts, the Romans, and the Egyptians all had some version of celebration in the season of harvest, when the Earth dies until spring. We in Southern California do not have a season of death, so should we be celebrating a Mexican holiday to suit ourselves?

Everyone everywhere experiences death, and so such a holiday, or holy day, falls naturally into the hands of cultural fusion. We can borrow another culture's ritual, so long as we honor its origin. In this way we can honor the great diversity of our nation. The Mexicans mourn as we do when a loved one dies, and they have somber funerals that are as sad and moving as ours. But the Days of the Dead are different, and they are celebrated in countless different ways all over Mexico – it is a time to celebrate the dead with joy, or as the spirit moves us. It is a time to honor the dead with beauty and color and creativity.

The Mexicans see that our handling of death is varied; there are times of sorrow, and times of joy where the dead are concerned. Today, let it be either one for you, or both. Let your heart be where it wants to be. There will be chances to laugh today, or to be sad.

So in this spirit let us begin, with a Chinese story as told by Osho, a popular mystic of our time.

STORY The Three Laughing Saints

I have heard about three Chinese mystics. Nobody knows their names now, and nobody ever knew their names. They were known only as the "Three Laughing Saints" because they never did anything else; they simply laughed.

These three people were really beautiful – laughing, and their bellies shaking. And then it would become an infection and others would start laughing. The whole marketplace would laugh. When just a few moments before, it was an ugly place where people were thinking only of money, suddenly these three mad people came and changed the quality of the whole marketplace. Now they had forgotten that they had come to purchase and sell. Nobody bothered about greed. For a few seconds a new world opened.

They moved all over China, from place to place, from village to village, just helping people to laugh. Sad people, angry people, greedy people, jealous people - they all started laughing with them. And many felt the key – you can be transformed.

Then, in one village it happened that one of the three of them died. Village people gathered and they said, "Now there will be trouble. Now we have to see how they laugh. Their friend has died; they must weep." But when they came, the two were dancing, laughing, and celebrating the death. The village people said, "Now this is too much. When a man is dead it is profane to laugh and dance." The two Laughing Saints said, "The whole life we laughed with him. How can we give him the last send-off with anything else? – we have to laugh, we have to enjoy, we have to celebrate. This is the only farewell that is possible for a man who has laughed his whole life. We don't see that he is dead. How can laughter die, how can life die?"

Then the body was to be burned, and the village people said, "We will give him a bath as the ritual prescribes." But those two friends said, "No, our friend has said, 'Don't perform any ritual and don't change my clothes and don't give me a bath. You just put me as I am on the burning pyre.' So we have to follow his instructions."

And then, suddenly, there was a great happening. When the body was put on the fire, that old man had played the last trick. He had hidden many fireworks under his clothes, and suddenly there was a festival! Then the whole village started laughing. These two mad friends were dancing, then the whole village started dancing. It was not a death, it was a new life.

ANTHEM

OFFERTORY

STORY FOR ALL AGES

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING

INVITATION TO THE ALTAR

Some of you placed your pictures and items of deceased loved ones on the altar before the service began. Now, as the choir sings, "We Remember Them," I invite those who haven't yet, to come forward to the altar to place your sacred items. And for those of you who have nothing to place on the altar, you may create your own altar in the sanctuary of your heart, and let yourself remember those who may enter.

ANTHEM

PRAYER

Let us remember our loved ones who have passed. Let this person or perhaps a pet, stand before you in your mind; let their living image radiate comfort and peace.

Whether it is joy that remembering brings, or sorrow, there is no correct way to remember; there is only remembrance. Remembering is so often a myriad of emotions: laughter mixes with tears, regrets mix with gratitudes. Resentments mix with forgiveness and love.

May we remind ourselves that grieving is for the living; the dead prefer attention. There are any number of ways to remember someone, but what matters is that we do not ignore the dead, and that we do not ignore our grief.

Some grief is so deep that it never goes away completely. Like a ghost, it will haunt us from time to time. To ignore our grief is to ignore what makes us human. Grief that revisits us is like a scar that hurts when it gets touched. The scar has become a part of us.

Let us embrace the paradox that sadness must be invited into our hearts, in order that sadness can be asked to leave our hearts. While we may think we need to expel our worst grief alone, the truth is that it is easier done with others – for it is the human condition to experience great loss. You are not alone.

Oddly it's not always with our family and friends that grief is best expressed, but with people with whom we find kinship, because the intent to heal is the same.

No matter how deep our loss, we must always return to life. Life is for the living – it is to be enjoyed and cherished – there is happiness in celebrating the memories of our lost loved ones, because – we are grateful for the gift we were given. AMEN

CHORAL RESPONSE

HOMILY

When I first arrived at this church over a year ago, I spoke about what my call to ministry was like. I'll never forget it. It was at the Outback Steakhouse, in 1997. My Dad's mother, my Grandma Wells had died in Georgia, and my family was at the restaurant for dinner on the day of her funeral. I delivered her eulogy that morning, and so many of her friends told me afterward how well I described her. I remembered then, as we were waiting for our steak dinners, that I had considered ministry back in High School. Why yes, of

course! I will be a UU minister! And so it came to pass, that my call to ministry was the last great gift my grandma gave me.

I will always miss my Grandma from time to time. My Grandpa Wells is another story. He died 9 months after Grandma did, but my brother and I didn't go to the funeral. The man had a penchant for stealing double A batteries, and my parents found enough to fill a barrel after he died. They considered handing them out as door prizes as people left the funeral.

My mother couldn't stand my grandpa, and he got under my skin, too. He was mean to my Grandma. But he was a character – there are many stories about him that will cause my family to laugh hysterically. Like the time he insisted to my Dad, my Grandma, and my brother and I, that he could wear the same outfit for a week straight and not wrack up any body odor. "You can smell my arm-pits," he said, wanting to prove his theory. When my Dad said, "No, thanks," he was so determined to prove his hygiene that he chased my Dad around the living room, bellowing, "SMELL MY PITS! SMELL MY PITS!"

Or there was the time he made the rambling toast at my older brother Bruce's wedding, at the end of which he finally said, "So HERE'S to Bruce and HANNAH!" No, at best Grandpa was funny and embarrassing, at worst he was mean; Grandpa was stubborn, never listened, and opinionated as they come.

But would I be happy to see him again? He did give me my naturally curly hair – but even if he hadn't, YES, of course - if I saw him again, I would embrace him with love.

How does that work? Have I forgiven him for his treatment of my Grandma? Not exactly. Forgiveness, after all, is never simple, perhaps especially after death. What is the connection between death, grief and forgiveness? I will return to that question. But let me ask you – what family members do you have, that have died, and you needed to or want to forgive? Is it harder to forgive them after they're gone, or easier? Or is forgiveness not even on the table? Does it matter?

If the United States had its own version of Dia de los Muertos every year, I wonder if these questions would be easier to answer. As it is, these are the types of questions and difficult feelings that can come up when other deaths occur, when we attend funeral services of other people. The feelings come rushing back into our hearts, even though we have asked them to stay out, forever. When my other Grandpa died, not even a year ago, I remember a friend of my mother's was crying more than anyone else at the funeral. I knew it was because her father, another difficult person, had died a year before, and the family had chosen to not have any memorial service at all – a sad choice for the living.

Un-experienced or unresolved sadness after a death is very hard on us, on a number of levels. The energy spent keeping grieving at bay is tiring. It's hard on our immune system and our emotional and spiritual health. The pain is stored somewhere inside us, and until it is invited into our hearts again – it waits.

And yet our culture does not provide many opportunities for these invitations. How much easier would it be to think about death and loss when everyone else around you is doing the same thing? But we are a society of individualists – right now, our country is

realizing in so many ways how bankrupt our ideal of self-reliance is. Things do not get better if we just leave them alone.

One thing we can learn from Mexico is their value of community. Day of the Dead could not be possible without a culture where the forest of family trees are still standing; where the tall branches of trees are all tangled up together, in tight-knit community. While economic hardship has been very tough on communities in Mexico - especially because they have lost so many of their men and young people to the hopes of the north - Mexicans maintain their traditions. In part this is because Mexicans experience more togetherness; people are more okay with being in each other's hair; families live closer together, and when tragedy hits, extended family is nearby to help console the grieving.

When tragedy hits any family, immediate family members are often incapable of comforting each other because they are each suffering their own grief, parents and children alike. And in the States, where extended families are usually spread across the country, tragedy can be very difficult for one family to handle. It makes you wonder if humanity was ever meant to be as mobile as we are today. Although, I know my parents were grateful for their mobility after they married, because they had what they called 'the five-state rule.' That is, the rule was they had to live at least five states away from my grandparents.

Family can drive us nuts, but – after all the traveling I have done in so-called “developing” countries, I am convinced that, overall, we are better off as human beings with lots of family around, living in rooted communities that are connected by family and history. The world over, people with lesser means usually have more community surrounding them. Modernity has been one mixed bag – in many ways we have socially progressed and evolved, but greater means and mobility has also brought greater isolation. We can see this in the people who feel they have no choice but to grieve alone. But that is hard.

When children have to grieve the loss of a parent or a sibling, they are especially vulnerable to being isolated, because they don't want to upset their parents further. So they keep quiet, and the grief waits.

Thankfully, there are people who are responding to the need for more togetherness and healing in our culture. One of these responses has been Comfort Zone Camp, a weekend long camp for grieving kids. A new member told me about it recently, and I'd like to tell you about it, too – there are camps in New York, Virginia, and Southern California. Lynne Hughes, the woman who founded it, lost both her parents separately, at an early age. “Grieving kids need a voice, need a place,” she says. “. . . It's an unmet need in society. Kids who have suffered a loss 'grow up with stuff. Grief doesn't go anywhere. It's just going to come out sideways and backwards . . .’”

While there is trepidation for the kids before they go to camp, the fears subside when campers see that it's not all about grieving. Each Camper has a Big Buddy, an adult volunteer of the same gender to look after them all weekend. There are lots of fun games, a Challenge Course to rebuild trust, and there are Healing Circles. The Healing Circles are gatherings of campers of similar ages, along with their Big Buddies. Healing circles meet four times over the course of a weekend to discuss the feelings and emotions of loss, each with a different theme. This is when kids finally feel like it's okay to share their stories of who they lost, to talk about what they miss most about the person, to show pictures, and of

course, to grieve. At the end of the camp, the parents come back and there is a departing ritual for everyone to participate in.

As you can imagine, the testimonials of campers on the website are very moving. But the testimonials of the volunteer adults are also moving. Many volunteers say that next to their weddings or the births of their children, "that it's the most powerful thing that they've ever done in their lives." It is a remarkable intergenerational situation. The adults are often drawn to volunteering because of their own losses. While the focus is always on the kids, the adults are simultaneously experiencing for themselves how the healing process works.

It works because people are there for the same purpose: they want to heal, and some part of them knows that it's hard, hard work, but it must be done; they want to be able to ask the sadness in their hearts to leave, and to visit less. The amazing discovery is that such grief loosens and tumbles out more easily, when it can be heard. The fears of letting it out melt away in the presence of community and love. Even in the presence of people you've only just met.

It works because all of us know some part of the human condition. While each loss is unique as the person you lose, the experience of loss is something you share as part of being human. This is why ritual, and a tradition of commemorating the dead can be so powerful – it not only says something about who you believe you are, it also affirms what you know to be true about life. Through all our losses, we belong to something much bigger, something holy. Something that, under the right conditions, can heal us. Under reverent conditions, ritual allows us to trust the power of grace.

Under similar conditions, the gift of forgiveness may also present itself as a possibility. Like the peace after grief, the peace after forgiveness is hard-earned through love and trust. Part of what's hard-earned for these kids, is being able to forgive themselves for wanting to have happy and normal lives, despite the loss of a parent or sibling. In the end, only they can choose to love themselves, to love life - to love, and to be loved. One of the campers of Comfort Zone Camp has said, "After a tragic event, you feel like you don't have the right to be happy again. But now I know that you do."

(I walk over to the altar and pick up a letter from my Grandpa).

Many years after both my grandparents died, when I was packing up to move from Michigan to Florida, I found this letter from my Grandpa – it's the only one he ever sent me, in 1998, about 6 months after Grandma died. After I reread it, I wept, because I saw that he was trying to replace my Grandma who wrote me countless letters.

The letter is full of tenderness, that deep down, I know my Grandpa possessed all along. In the letter there is also the man I knew best, parts of which, I also know in my father. On the first page he wrote: "Hannah Hope Wells, if you don't get with it and seriously, consistently, without interruption, get your college diploma and send me a photocopy of it, I AM CUTTING YOU OFF!"

But as if to tear down any shred of doubt that I might have about his capacity to love, he writes at the top of the second page:

"I love you.

Candi loves you! In parentheses, (#1 cat), Head of Household

Tiger loves you! (#2 Spicy Cat)

Brandy loves you! (4 ½ year old shiny black cocker spaniel)

Bonnie loves you! (2 month old ½ cocker spaniel, black with white trim).

and below this, in smaller, shakier script,

Grandma loves you!

Love,

Shanghai Grandpa"

Do I even need to forgive my Grandpa anymore? Maybe who he was is not mine to forgive.

Maybe I need to forgive myself, for not attending his funeral, and not honoring his life much, much more than I have.

What honoring do you want to do? What grieving and forgiving would you like to release if you could? The thread that runs through death, grieving, and forgiving, is of course, love. So to love someone by honoring their memory – at least once a year, however it feels right – is a very good place to start.

The Day of the Dead is also about remembering the living, honoring the living, and blessing life. So for the sake of both the living and the dead, take time this week to remember those whose lives touched yours. Then pay some attention to those still alive whose lives are touching yours, people to whom you need to express your gratitude and love. And finally, let it be about you. Remember yourself, honor your life, and bless it. Remember. Honor. And bless. Amen.

Let's rise in body or in spirit for our final hymn, #89, Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life