

For Love is Fierce

Psalm 34:18, Song of Songs 8:6-7

January 31, 2021

La Verne Church of the Brethren

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We lost twenty-one members of our church family since we gathered together in our sanctuary last January for our annual Memorial Sunday. That is double how many people we normally lose in a year. Our grief is even wider than usual.

The people we lost had their pews. I could look out on a Sunday and know where each of them would be sitting. Three of the people we lost this year were members of our church staff at one time, one was a former Senior Pastor. Many of them were musicians and enhanced our lives through their gift and appreciation of music. They sang in the church choir, played the piano or the organ. They were people who cared about the world and the lives of their fellow human beings....living and working in Mexico, serving with Habitat for Humanity, being present to the families of those imprisoned, serving their communities in leadership roles and visiting and loving the sick and the lonely among us. They had some amazing stories – like being saved from a near fatal plane crash in the Yucatan jungle by a local Mayan tribe or following a dream to become part of major league baseball and becoming a batting coach for the Dodgers. They were hard workers. They loved their families and were loved by them. All but one of them died after the pandemic swept in and made us “safer at home” and therefore, unable to gather together in person to mourn their deaths.

These people were ours. We were family to each other. That came home to me in a profound way when a hospice chaplain called me to tell me of Ruth Lininger’s death. She said, “I called you because you were listed as her next of kin.” When we can gather again in this sanctuary, we will notice the absence of Bernie sitting up front and Bob at the back and Ruth in the cut-out pew she claimed as her own. We will miss John’s deep voice in the choir and Larry in the bell choir and the smile on Florence’s face that went from ear to ear and Leola’s blue eyes that sparkled with delight as she recounted a story and Millie reaching out to all new people with love and welcome. The losses of this past year are tangible for us as a congregation.

While we have named and remembered the saints of our church in this service, I am very aware that many, many of you have lost family and friends who weren’t part of this congregation. You have lost grandparents, children, siblings, aunts, uncles, spouses, grandparents, students, co-workers, and beloved friends. More than ever, we are aware of the loss of our unnamed brothers and sisters around this globe because every time we turn on the television there is a sidebar keeping us current on the number of deaths in the United States and the world due to Covid-19 – over 2 million people now.

Families have had to navigate the long list of impersonal details that follow a death with all the further complications of a deadly virus. They have had to make an appointment

with the bank, meet the attorney outside, spend hours on the phone, figure out how to clean out a home without being together, wait for a death certificate, cremation or burial as mortuaries navigate a backlog of deaths and then they must decide as a family whether they will plan an online memorial service or wait until they could gather again in person.

And for many families, death followed weeks or months of trying to find care for their loved ones or being shut out of hospital rooms or holding up love notes through the windows of skilled nursing centers. They were forced to say good-bye to family members without being able to hold them, touch them, whisper love into their ear.

And with every death we have had relive the griefs of our own individual lives. I have walked through the loss of my husband over and over and over again this year as I have lived alone, without human contact. We are weary of death and loss and grief. We are weary of staying away from each other so as not to cause further death and loss and grief.

We could spend hours recounting and reliving the pain of all the death we have witnessed. Our sorrows are so deep this year we could fall into the crevass of sadness and never crawl out. It feels important to name it and speak our lament. We will be processing our anguish for years to come, healing from its reality and its heartache. It is important we grieve. It is important we do not voice false comfort or unthinking platitudes or encourage someone to hurry up and be okay or tell them it could be worse. We must sit in our discomfort and feel the ache for it is the price of love.

Love is why we grieve...love. It is there...always there at the base of our mourning. As I pastor, it is in the depths of death and dying that I have witnessed the most beautiful testaments of love. It is death's palpable and tangible companion. I have witnessed love's presence, longevity, tenderness, resilience, cohesion and fierceness as I have walked with families and accompanied the dying. I have seen it for myself in my own loss. Love is the most consistent reality through all of it.

I share with you a story from this past year, with permission. About three weeks before Bernie Pence died, I gathered with her husband and children for an anointing service. By gather, I mean we gathered through FaceTime. One of her children joined from Spain in what had to have been a very late hour. We all wished we could be in the same room but what we experienced was no less real, no less sacred. You could feel the love...you could see it, hear it, touch it.

Bernie spoke of her life, describing each place they had lived, each child they had birthed. She shared memories of each of them. Then all four of her children spoke to her of what she had taught them. Gerry, her husband, of 72 years, shared how grateful he was for this family. He said to Bernie, "It has been wonderful to be your husband. We have so much to be proud of...so much to be thankful for. It's a wonderful life." When we finished anointing her and praying, Bernie spontaneously began to sing, "Amen! Amen!" everybody joined her "Amen! Amen! Amen!" Sometimes I witness

something so beautiful, so full of heart, so real, so sacred, so loving that I can't put words to it...all I can do is recount the story.

Today, Roberta one of Fran Rodriguez's children, read our scripture from Song of Songs. Love is as strong as death. Passion as fierce as the grave. Waters cannot quench love. Floods cannot drown it. I thought of this scripture as I sat with the Pence family that night. Death is an ending. It feels decisive and permanent....and yet, it is no match for love. Death does not conquer love. Death does not end the love you felt or continue to feel coming back to you.

I remember, several months after my husband died, my oldest son called me. He said, "I was looking into the mirror this morning and I felt Dad's presence. It wasn't because I look like my father," he said. "It was more than that. I knew with certainty that he still sees me and loves me." In his words I heard the words of the poet Munia Khan: "I will keep on loving you until eternity makes me love you more."

My dear friends, please don't let the trauma of this past year keep you from dwelling in the love that will not let us go. You are immersed in it. Love is wide and deep and unending. There is a foreverness in our loving and being loved. We are absolutely enveloped...encased in love. Hold on to the truth. For I believe that just as nothing can separate us from the love of God...nothing can separate us from the love we have shared with those who have passed on before us. We carry that love in our bodies, in our memories, in the love we pass on to those who carry on after we leave this world. This love just keeps getting passed on until eternity makes it grow ever larger. Amen.