*A Matter of Life and Death*

Hebrews 12:1, Wisdom 3:1-3

October 24, 2021

La Verne Church of the Brethren

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I am in my 37th year of ordained ministry and, in that time period, I think I have officiated at well over 400 memorial services. I am guessing that 90% of those were for people I knew well. I had played cards with them; or visited them in their homes; or knew what kind of food they brought to church potlucks; or dedicated their children; or prayed with them about their deepest wounds or all of the above. Occasionally someone will ask me how I do this grief work. I consider it a sacred privilege to walk with families during times of profound grief and, at the same time, I am also navigating my own grief over the person’s death. Much of my sorrow is for the loved ones of the deceased who now have to figure out life without their beloved. When I officiate a memorial service, I can see the faces of the family sitting on the front row of pews here or the front row of chairs on the courtyard. I see the grief etched on their faces. I understand the toll sorrow takes on the body and I know that journey first-hand.

What we most often do with things that cause that kind of agony is to not talk about them. Half of people over 40, whose parents are still living, report that they don’t talk to their elderly parents about the “D word”. In fact, a third of that same age group admit they would rather talk about their weight than broach the subject of death. However, if you ask their parents how comfortable they feel about talking about death they often say it is one of the easiest subjects to discuss. Maybe one of the reasons for that is that the older you are the more loss you have experienced and the more aware you are that we all die. You want and need a place to process your own feelings and anxieties about it. But those around you don’t want to entertain the idea of you not being here.

I have a framed photo in my house taken on the day I was ordained, which happened here at the La Verne Church of the Brethren in June of 1985. I am standing in the very middle of the frame. My husband, my parents and my mother-in-law are standing around me. Jacki Gingrich took the photo and gave it to me when I moved here to become your Senior Pastor. I keep that photo on the desk where I sit every morning to dry my hair. I am the only person in that photo who is still alive. That truth overwhelms me…somedays with profound loss and somedays with worry about how I will die…and somedays with gratitude for those four amazing people who loved me and saw me.

I carry photos of these same people on my phone. The photo of me sitting on my mother’s lap in our backyard in Kansas when I was six years old. The one of my wedding day with the same people standing around me, Bryan in a champagne colored tux with tails -- a mistake of the tux shop that infuriated Bryan so much. There is a photo of my father in a swimming pool with a very young Matt riding on his back. I am grateful for all these photos that let me hold onto and remember family.

That is what the author of Hebrews is doing in the 11th chapter. He is providing us with snapshots…. verbal photos of our family of faith….Sarah, barren into her old age, becomes pregnant; Rahab who hid the Israelite scouts; Sampson and Daniel who both took on lions and won. We see Esther, considered weak and unimportant and yet she turned weakness into strength. Hebrews talks about these giants of our faith and also mentions the unnamed martyrs who were sawed in two, tormented, left destitute or persecuted.

The author of Hebrews wants us to hold onto these photos of our religious ancestors. Remembering them is an invitation to see ourselves as part of an ongoing story. Starting with Abel we journey through the Hebrew Bible and into the present stories of the faithful we know. The Book of Hebrews wants us to see our calling as part of this long line of the faithful.

With a closer look we see that some of these portraits tell stories of those who triumphed….strong individuals who received God’ promises, shut the mouths of lions and conquered their enemies. Alongside the portraits of those who prevailed are those who suffered greatly….strong individuals who endured imprisonment, beatings, illness, violence and death. The family photo album of spiritual ancestors puts these portraits side by side. When we die…how we die does not define our faithfulness or God’s love for us. In a culture that puts people into categories of success and failure, the book of Hebrews intermingles triumph and suffering. Faithfulness shines through in triumph and suffering, as well as in joy and sorrow, as well as in life and death.

I just got back from a vacation to Savannah, Georgia with my youngest son. Of course, we went to Bonaventure Cemetery, which must be one of the most beautiful cemeteries in the country. We lazily strolled through the place reading the old and worn gravestones of those who died in infancy and those who lived to be 104. I often go to cemeteries when I travel. I believe they tell us so much history…so much about a place and its culture. A graveyard was often a stop on the family vacations of my childhood. One of the memories my children have of my mother (their grandmother) is of her taking them to a cemetery. She came equipped with butcher paper and charcoal and had them make rubbings of their favorite tombstones. I experienced that exact same activity with my mother when I was a child.

I am guessing that there are some of you who think this practice of visiting cemeteries and making rubbings is macabre or maybe disrespectful. I would disagree. My parents intentionally wanted their children to make friends with death rather than see it as the enemy…the worst thing that can happen…something to fight against with whatever means necessary. They wanted us to see death as part of life.

I think that is another intention of the author of Hebrews as we move from chapter 11 to chapter 12: *Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.* We do not need to fear death or refuse to discuss it or pretend it won’t happen to us or fight it with every fiber of our being for we are surrounded by this great cloud of people who have gone before us. That is what I think of as I look at that photo every morning of those members of my family who have joined my great cloud of witnesses. I am surrounded in love. They may not be here on this earth anymore but their love for me and my love for them never dies. When I leave this world, I want my family to know without reservation that I am fine, and they are okay. I want those who come after me to run with perseverance and joy and faithfulness the race this is set before them.

Next week we are doing something here at the La Verne Church of the Brethren that we have never done before. We are celebrating Dia de los Muertos. Translated into English it means Day of the Dead. Dia de los Muertos is in essence a celebration of love, family and life. It is not a solemn event. This multi-day event allows people the time to remember and connect with those who have died. People build home altars called ofrendas or offerings decorated with marigolds, favorite foods of the departed and photos of those they want and need to remember. Remembering them is our privilege and our obligation. Families make trips to the cemetery together, sharing picnics at the graveside of their ancestors. Humorous stories are told. Lively music abounds.

By not being afraid to speak of death, by honoring and remembering the lives of those who have passed on, Dia de los Muertos reminds us to be more deeply aware of the precious moments of this life -- the feel of the breeze on the face, an authentic conversation with a friend, laughing with family over a shared memory…all the moments you wouldn’t think to document with a photo but that fill you with a sense of the giftedness of this amazing life.

Dia de los Muertos isn’t just about connecting with the dead or reminding us of the gift of our own lives. It also connects us with the living. People give each other sugar skulls and pan de muerto (bread of the dead) – Mexican bread shaped very specifically with what looks like a large drop in the center and bones that go out from that drop. Some say the circle in the middle of the bread signifies a teardrop shed for those who have died. This holiday truly is a very healthy way to honor the dead in the midst of celebrating love, family and life.

Next week we are going to celebrate Dia de los Muertos here at the La Verne Church of the Brethren. There will be those of us in this congregation who have never experienced this holiday and those for whom this multi-day event is a day of deep family tradition and significance. We will be led in worship by a member of our congregation for whom Dia de los Muertos has deep significance. As I said in the welcome we will build an ofrenda here at the front of the sanctuary. Please bring with you next week a framed photo or bring the favorite food of the person you are remembering or a memento that reminds you a loved one who is now part of your great cloud of witnesses. After worship we will go out into the courtyard to the sounds of a live Mariachi band and traditional bread and hot chocolate and the opportunity to make papel picado or flower marigolds or paint sugar skulls.

Friends, listen to the lives of those who now encircle you from the other side of the grave. I hear them telling us to connect with each other….to remember them and all the precious moments we shared….to live every moment of this precious life we have been granted….and to not be afraid. We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. Let us remember the gift of faith and faithfulness they have bestowed on us as we run the race that is set before each of us. Amen.