



ALL SOULS

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 3RD

PREACHED BY REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER

Well, today is a holy day in church. Not because any Unitarian in their right mind celebrates All Saints or All Souls, two days in the traditional church to lift up the saints who proved it and the souls who didn't, but because it is a chance to speak the truth. Now, you say, "Well, every Sunday is the chance to speak the truth. Why this Sunday? Why set aside today to speak the truth when the truth sets us free, didn't he say? Why even say it's a Sunday about truth when you had us bring photos of the dead and light candles and carry frames and pictures of the ones we loved all the way here? Why is it a day for the truth? Why do we do this?" you ask.

And part of the answer is because the church I served in Boston before I came here used to have a small chapel service every Sunday with about 75 high-minded Bostonians. Most of them were under 12 years old. And on All Souls Day we had them bring photos of their loved ones who died, and each and every person who attended that chapel did that. The Chapmans and the Olsons and the Hurleys, each and every one of them came up to the chancel and stood on the little wooden step with the ivy-walled garden through the windows and the brick homes of Beacon Hill the backdrop, and each stood on the tiny chancel, and the children with their families and their tiny voices said things like, "This is my Aunt Cecile, she died." Or, "This is my cat Pixie. He died."

And one by one they came up and placed a photo on the small communion table until we had built a beautiful altar to the dead, and we sang For All the Saints and we prayed for them, and young and old teared up and felt something pulling them back in nostalgia and pushing them forward in a hope that we might live up to their hopes. The preciousness of that moment, the truth of that moment is why we do All Souls at First Unitarian Church in Dallas, Texas today. We do it because when little Mark Perry stood up on that tiny wooden chancel and held his picture of his dog who had died and Mark eked out

the name that we never heard and he burst into tears and ran back and jumped onto his father's lap and the next child came forward, we knew something true was happening. Something supremely truthful was going on. And it wasn't because of anything that I said. It wasn't because the little organ could stay in tune or whether the girl in the third row of that tiny chapel could ever hold a single note in tune.

It was because we were facing one of life's great truths and we were facing it together. You see, you don't have to live too long to begin to get the sense that life in all its splendor, in all its joys and successes, is also a series of losses. We lose our innocence and we lose our friends and we lose our children and we lose our parents, and on and on and on. Those losses range from fortunes to hope to faith. I've heard your stories. And when they are losses of people we love, the real truth of the matter comes through. That one that Ben Franklin was right about, that the only thing that is certain in life is death and taxes. Just to be clear where that came from, it came from a letter that he wrote to a friend of his in France.

He wrote, awkwardly, a relevant topic for a Sunday before a very crazy election in which the letter said, "Our Constitution is now established and has an appearance that promises permanency. But in this world, nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes." Was Franklin looking at us through a crystal ball? I do not know. Or did he just know that change was part of everything, like his Buddhist friends kept telling him down at the pub on Delancey Street? "Ben, don't fool yourself," these Buddhist friends said, the Buddhist friends that I just made up. "All is permanent, all is impermanent," they would say, to which Ben would reply, "I must disagree, my salient amigo. Death and taxes are certain." And so if in life there is death and taxes and there is joy and wonder and fleeting moments of love and exuberance and horrid moments of despair and a lot of worries and a lot of emails and a lot of stupid texts your friends send you and a million fundraising texts from Kamala Harris, and bad news and good news, it is also a series of losses.

And I know this not just as your minister, but as a 57-year-old human being. This year I lost four people in my life. As I said earlier, my great aunt who was 110, my seminary friend, once upon a time the sabbatical minister here, Rick Coyle, my mentor and teacher who I spent a lot of weeks in my life when I was between 17 and 25 learning from him how to be grounded, to find the center of myself, and my college roommate whom I lived in India with when we were there for junior year abroad. And each death took me by surprise, and each carries a different level of grief. But each one called me to a truth, to acknowledge some true things that I've realized over these months, that my life is evolved through relationships with others. That when we lose those relationships, it feels like it shouldn't be and it can't be. That death has permanence that we are hardly willing to embrace, and in some case, we refuse to accept.

Cue the poet today, "They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom I know, but I do not approve. More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world," she said. Truths that we know that no kind word replaces the glimmer in a loved one's eyes who is gone. No easy answer that they're in a better place or it was God's plan helps in any way to ease the pain of loss. Not much help for the absence of the friend or the beloved. Not much at all

except the presence of friends and loved ones who live, except for moments of sharing who they were in a day in church maybe, where we say their names and we state the truths and we know of their passing. And that sound is not them coming. That's the air conditioning. It's the wind or rain, whatever it is.

So when little Mark Perry, imagine, I know you can imagine this, in his little suit with a little tie. People in Boston dress up for church. Little Mark Perry stood on that tiny wooden chancel, the slanted light from the Boston fall morning shined in his face, and he held his picture awkwardly after his dad encouraged him to go back up and tell us who he lost. And he gently and almost imperceptibly said, "Buddy, my dog." We felt the truth of loss permeate him and we in turn felt that same feeling passed through us, and that is real and that is true.

To turn away from what is real is false. To avoid loss is to fail the love they gave us. However painful it is to hold them in regard and name them for one another, however much we do not approve of their going, to hold them is to encourage in each of us the best parts of ourselves that they helped create. And so today we do not hide from this reality, nor do we paint it with the names of saints who somehow worked three miracles and were documented at the Vatican. We bring the souls and our souls to the altar today to share in this very human reality that we know what it means to lose someone and to remember them. And we do it knowing that one day someone might bring our photo and place it on this altar, and we will be remembered for the love we gave and received.

This is All Souls Day in Dallas, Texas, friends. Today we remind ourselves of those who died, and we set aside this hour to hold this holy space and time. Reverend Howard Thurman writes, "Again and again it comes, a season of remembrance. Forgotten treasures of dreams reclaim their place. Long lost memories come trooping back to me. This is my season of remembrance, my time of recollection into the challenge of my anguish." He says, "I throw the strength of all my hope. I match the darts of my despair with the treasure of my dreams. Upon the current of my heart I float the burdens of the years. I challenge the mind of death with the love of life."

So I say to you, friends, today in this season of remembrance, to remember that we belong to something bigger than we perceive. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have gone and are making of this beautiful human tapestry of love and life, and pictures and candles up here in front of church reminds us of that, that we cannot ever sever our connections to them unless we forget them. That we cannot forget that we belong, and we must remain in that cloud of witnesses that holds us. So today, this act of memory is an act of resistance to the disease of disconnection, to the disease of spiritual loneliness. Our collective pain and our joy puts us in this position to be in communion with each other and the dead and to see that connection come to life.

My colleague Richard Gilbert wrote, "We belong to a great community of all souls, a long procession of humanity stretching back in time beyond our comprehension sharing with us life. We are privileged to be part of those who have marveled at the miracle of birth, who have found meaning in the midst of life, and who stand humbly before the mystery of death. We belong to this great community of souls." And so friends, today we join together. We mourn and we rejoice in a world that includes so many

lives, ours and theirs. So as we do each year, we invite you to tread lightly on the human path to life and death, gain, loss, love and loneliness, despair and hope, to see one another. To see here a community of all souls who, these, stare back at you through the ages, our family and our friends, companions on this journey, and to hold one another in this fragile experiment of life.

I invite you now into an act of remembrance. Will you join me now in this time where we bless all the mourners today, those whose memories are fresh with the faces of the dead? I invite those of you in this sanctuary and online to rise as you're able who have lost someone in the last 12 months. If you're mourning a death in the last 12 months, I invite you to stand, and if you can't stand, raise your hand and to take the hand of someone. Will you rise if you're mourning a death in the last 12 months? You, friends, we see you and we read this prayer to you, and I ask those who are seated to respond to this Jewish prayer. The response is, "We remember them." And it goes like this. "Bless our memories now as we remember them."

Mourners who are standing, we are your ballast. If you let us, we are here for you. We acknowledge you today here in this place. Please be seated. And as we do each year, we name those members of the church who have died since All Souls Day last year, and we present their pictures on the screens of the sanctuary for you to receive them in love. And I invite you, friends, to now speak the names of those who you brought a photo with here today or are remembering, to speak their names into the space of this sanctuary. Will you raise their names now? And let us join together in prayer.

God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming, bless those who mourn and know loss. Bless those who know a leftover love, those who may have lost trust in the world, but can find hope in seeds of remembrance, of acts of friendship and affection. Bless the mourners who stood in our midst who rose to honor the passing of someone in their lives. Bless those who are held by this community. May they find peace. Bless those who hold dearly to life, to know what it takes to tend what isn't ours for the having. Bless those who do not fear what we all must relinquish, but rejoice in life and blessing. Blessed are those who mourn and the great cloud of witnesses we remember today. For all the saints of our lives, all the souls who live among us, who came before, who come to us in dreams, who come to us in memory and live forevermore, we pray this prayer. Amen.