SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2019
DANIEL 7:1-3, 15-18; PSALM 149; EPHESIANS 1:11-23; LUKE 6:20-31

THE GIVE AND TAKE OF LIFE

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This past spring, I extended an invitation to engage a Lenten practice of planning your own funeral. Many have done so and shared their document with us so we could place it on file, hopefully not needed anytime soon. Many also reported finding great meaning in the exercise, and I am glad for that.

I will tell you I did the work also. It had been several years since I last did so. It was good work, but there were difficulties too, not least of which was trying to decide

what music to have at my funeral. The list I created would have meant a funeral service several hours long, with some present probably dying of anguish right there.

I love our Anglican music—the hymns, the chants, the anthems—they speak to the depths of my being and have since I was a little child. It is no secret that music provides a soul language to make sense of things that will not otherwise ring true using more prosaic vocabulary.

I have always had favorite hymns. The same for anthems that our choirs sing, or that I sang as a choir boy, and I now hear our Choir School children singing decades later.

But the exercise of planning my funeral last spring, when I had way too many hymns and anthems—enough for three or four funerals—that exercise invited a new practice: rather than having favorites, two things opened up for me: 1) that I can practice gratitude with any hymn or anthem, each will speak its truth to me if I will listen, and in that way I can say that each is "one of my favorites." You may hear me say that from time to time in the announcements here. And 2) as it relates to my funeral, I left the long list of music along with an instruction that Kathy and Michael Kleinschmidt must decide which ones to use. I won't really care at that point, right?

Today we observe the Feast of All Saints—a tradition rich with layers of meaning to be explored with special intention today as we remember those who have died while also celebrating new life arising from the baptismal waters. There is a fierce and tender wisdom to be gleaned here. And the music of All Saints Sunday expresses it boldly, while also embracing us with a touch tender enough to allow us to hold the mystery in our hearts, let it pour over our flesh and reverberate in our bones as we strive to make sense of the whole of life, including the experience of death.

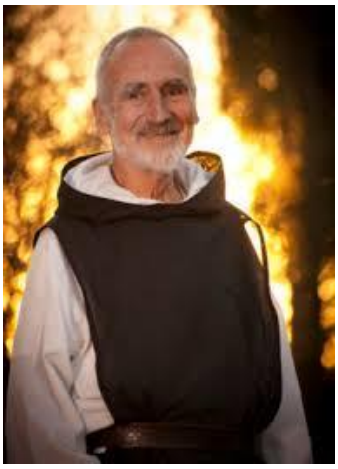
The truth is, my friends, my heart is weighed down with the deep sense of loss I feel in the wake of several deaths in this community. People I have known and loved and cared for, who've known and loved and cared for me, and more of them in recent months than usual. I know from many of you that you feel a similar weariness. Others may know that same weight on the heart from the death of loved ones—family, friends, pets, or even through the news of violence around the world. It is a lot to bear.

This day—this All Saints Sunday—holds that weight with us, even for us, as it

reminds us of eternal truths that resonate with all creation: that in the realm of God's creative and consummate love, nothing is lost, no one is lost. We mark our foreheads as a reminder of this promise. We sprinkle holy water as a way of attesting to this truth. This liturgy invites us to mark time by that mystery, not just today, but every day of our lives.

In the Benedictine tradition, there is the practice of *momenta mori*, literally the practice of keeping the moment of death before us, but it is not about perseverating on the end of life, or the image of physical death, our own or anyone else's. The practice is about holding the paradox of death as a horizon to which we all must travel while also incorporating an awareness of dying in every moment of life, so that we might be more fully alive. It's that contrast that offers the shadowy beauty of meaning to break into our lives here and now, again and again.[ii]

David Steindl-Rast is a Benedictine monk who offers great wisdom about this important work to which we are all called. First, he says the modern world has taught us to suppress or neglect this work. We are drawn into the orbit of death-denying, purposeful activities—task lists, jobs done, work products delivered, careers claimed—all good work perhaps, but in the end, as we approach our own death, purpose inevitably slips from our hands, and what we long for in that moment is meaning by which the whole of life, and death, will make sense, not as a list of jobs done, or fame achieved, but something more than that. Relationally contoured, attuned to the rhythm of beloved identity, which enables us to resonate with the yearning to know something larger than ourselves, and through that connection, discover meaning in our lives.



Br. Steindl-Rast says the secret to opening into this truth is to strike balance in life. Balance in purpose and meaning. What he calls a "give-and-take" method of living. Modern culture has many more idioms of taking than giving—we take a walk, take an exam, take a trip, take a bath, take a nap, take time to do something… All suggesting they are purposeful activities. Active. But if we only take a breath, and never give it up, we will suffocate. The heart's purpose is a pump, but it cannot work if it only takes in blood but never gives it to the body. Ask the parent of any restless toddler: does the child ever really "take a nap" or do they give themselves to

the nap? Or what does it mean to "take time" when really anything worth doing is really inviting us to give time to it.

And finally, we cannot say we take death in any meaningful way, but we can give ourselves to its real place in our lives, not as an enemy, but as an ever-present companion, *momenta mori.* It is part of the flow, the cadence, the rhythms, the give and take of a life with meaning.

It is not a giving in. It is a giving up, releasing into the mystery, so that we die into deeper life here and now. It takes courage; it's risky because it means we move beyond the realm of purpose and control, to explore the more complex chords of meaning along the way. What we as Christians call "life in Christ," or the "Christian way and life," which holds space for us on days like today to ponder the deep mystery of dying into deeper life, in baptism, in the flow of everyday life, and in death.

We speak of the Communion of Saints today, not as a teaser to some merit-based gift of immortality to be granted for those who meet certain expectations in this life, but our words today, our faith statements, our music all bear witness to the divine promise that eternal life is not something gained after mortal death, but it is the gift to be relished here and now, a gift that nourishes us with feasts such as All Saints' Sunday, a gift of God for the people of God that invites us into that Mystical Communion in this life, with all who have gone before, and those yet to come, and indeed all creation. The gift to inhale; and the gift to exhale and know that we are connected, you and me, and all creation, and for that I am exceedingly grateful.

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[i] https://griefandmourning.com/life-and-death

[ii] Much of what follows is exegetically extracted from a wonderful essay by Br. Steindl-Rast which offers much more wisdom. I commend it highly. https://parabola.org/2016/02/29/learning-die-brother-david-steindl-rast/

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