

A cloud of witnesses: Living, loving and leaving
November 1, 2015 | Anita Retzlaff

We have conducted more than 130 funeral or memorial services since this congregation came into being 50 years ago. There are three plaques in the foyer that list the names of those related directly to our congregation who have died. In biblical language, people who have died are remembered as “so great a cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 1:12) who have enriched our lives and nurtured faith. In church tradition it is “the communion of saints” that indicates the spiritual union of all Christians. Having gone before us these good folks whom we have loved are those we remember on All Saints Day and will commemorate again on In Memoriam Sunday at the end of this month. All Saints Day celebrates the people of God, living and dead, who are the body of Christ. That includes all of us alive and present today. It is rather like a grand reunion.

Funerals are not a weekly occurrence in the worship life of the church and I do give God thanks for that. We all do. And the younger you are the less likely it is that you have attended funerals at all. In a sense that is regrettable only because there is rich language about God and a great deal of thanksgiving that is part of a funeral service.

And so, for me, funerals and memorial services are a natural part of the ebb and flow of the church year and I am always greatly heartened and inspired by the hope that we speak about when we say a final farewell to someone whom we love. However, I realize that Sunday morning scriptures and reflections do not necessarily touch on this amazing hope in the same way we recognize it at the time of someone’s death. This morning, and very briefly, I would like to share with you that core of the gospel message that I know to be foundational to funeral and memorial services. [As a side note, the difference between a funeral and a memorial service is that there is actually a casket present at a funeral whereas a memorial service may have ashes present.]

Three scripture texts that are used very frequently at funerals in this congregation include the 23rd Psalm which we read together as well as the texts from the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation that are printed in your bulletins. Hope gleaned from John and Revelation is simply this in a nutshell: out of illness and decay comes something new; God cares and consoles; God never leaves us. And so over the years as I have worked with families preparing a service testifying to the steadfast love of God I have used one paragraph over and over again. I don’t think it means that there is nothing new to say but these words function for me as do the words of the Lord’s Prayer or the recitation of a benediction at the end of the service. We can rely on these words and always they give us courage and support.

It goes like this: "Praise be to our God who grants us hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. For that inheritance is one that nothing can destroy or spoil. None of us lives in isolation and none of us dies alone, for at every moment life links us to God, and when we die we come face to face with God. Christ lived and died and lives again to establish his lordship and to offer his friendship to the living and to the dead. We do not understand the mysteries of death or of life, but we trust the God who knows us and cares for us and never forsakes us."

It is with this assurance of love and presence that we surround ourselves at the time of someone’s death and forever after. For the communion of saints and the great cloud of witnesses imply that there is an ongoing connection and memory between those who are living

and those who have died. I have asked Don Froese to share briefly about the ways in which he remembers or memorializes his parents.

Don Froese

I am a preacher’s kid! Service to God and the church was the cornerstone of my parents’ life. As I look back on their lives, this dedication to ministry is probably the greatest legacy I cherish. From the very beginning of their marriage until they were no longer able to do it, they served, even in tough times when the monthly paycheck from the mission’s office didn’t arrive. This example has brushed off on their kids, as each one of us has been involved in church or para-church organizations, either as volunteers or staff, at some point in our lives. Paramount to their service was to make sure that the individuals they met had a personal relationship to God. While I did not always appreciate the faith practice of my parents, they knew the God in whom they believed, and nothing was going to stop them from serving their God.

To some extent, I suppose, my service in the church has been a memorial to the example they set for me. I had not consciously thought of it that way. Service was a natural part of being in the church. May the memory of their example live on in me as I, too, strive to serve God as I am able.

Memories can be comforting. Remembering keeps someone alive in our hearts and minds. My nephew Jordan Riekman visits the gravesite where his grandpa’s (my father’s) ashes are interred. Jord is the grandson of Anne Retzlaff and Edith and George Riekman. This is how he remembers his grandfather when he goes out to Hillcrest. Alison will read Jord’s story.

Jordan Riekman

“Going to Grandpa’s grave I think of his final hours. [Jord shares a photo on his iPad of Grandpa’s hand in his, the last day in the hospital.] I go to his grave whenever I feel the need to visit or when I think Grandpa needs a visit. I like to see the scenery around the grave as the seasons change. Usually I talk to him and play music on my iPad. One time, I was facing Grandpa’s grave and I noticed something fluffy up in the tree and my jaw dropped. It was a great horned owl. The owl was like a guardian who watched over him; maybe it was the eyes of God. Sometimes I bring flowers. I imagine Grandpa in the good days and I say to him, “I will look after Grandma for you.” Sometimes before I leave, I hear the words of a song, “We will meet again, don’t know where and don’t know when.””

Above all, the words from scripture, the hope that we have, is that God is our comfort and strength, our companion through all time and that nothing, ever, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The Spirit of Divine Love transforms our lives and provides a spiritual connection throughout all time: a mystical union. At every moment life links us to God – however we might imagine that. We do not understand the mysteries of death or of life but we trust the God who says, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Thanks be to God. AMEN