

Our last “normal” service held at Mt. Zion before the pandemic began was the memorial service for our beloved sister in Christ, Lucy Larson. As many of you know, Lucy was a very long-time member of Mt. Zion, and one of four generations of her family to be active in the church at this time. She came to church every Sunday looking great, well into her 90s, signature lipstick and smile in tow. She became ill and her health declined pretty quickly over a few weeks, and died in early March of this year. The evening before her funeral, after the visitation, I had an opportunity to join her family for a time of prayer and sharing stories about Lucy’s life. I learned so many wonderful things, and the warmth and support in that space was remarkable. We were able to hold a lovely service where lots of folks from the church and community came to pay their respects and grieve. Not two hours after we laid Lucy’s ashes to rest in the earth, we received the news that the schools were closing down because of the pandemic, and the decision was made that Mt. Zion would do the same. I will certainly never forget March 13, 2020.

And yet, I often call it “poetic” that things happened in this way - that before we moved into a season of complete unknowns and overwhelm that we got to celebrate the long and full life of Lucy, who we loved. That we got to celebrate the life of a dear sister in Christ and be reminded of both the joys and various kinds of grief that come from being human. That for the day we remembered Lucy, and the day that changed the course of our whole year, this whole season of life for us, the promises of God’s reign and the kingdom of heaven were made just a bit more real, thanks to the love and community surrounding a beloved saint.

The traditional celebrations of All Saints Sunday remind and encourage us that the separation between heaven and earth becomes a bit smaller. When we lean into the community of faith, the love that we find in the body of Christ, we get a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. We learn

And in those beginning days of the pandemic, we banded together like the kingdom of heaven in ways I have not seen or experienced before in my life. People calling and reaching out in lots of ways. Sharing Facebook

posts about being willing to pick up groceries for total strangers that simply needed food. Most of us were surprised and disoriented and a bit fearful in those early days, but overall understood the need for each other, the need for community, the need for the body of Christ as our initial and holy instincts to survive kicked in.

We did not judge people for being meek, hungry or thirsty, or humble in heart, we recognized our collective humanity against the common enemy virus that persecuted each one of our bodies. We were human, together, and understood the power of the body of Christ. And today, I hope we can find reminders of that common humanity, that we are all just here trying to survive and hopefully even thrive, by the grace of God. Coping with grief as we remember beloved people who have passed away makes that survival really, really hard sometimes. And

As one of my favorite authors, theologians, and now podcast hosts, Kate Bowler, recently wrote about All Saints and All Souls - "It is a time for us to grieve what we have lost.

It's a time to think about that thin place between the living and the dead. It's a reminder in the midst of distended, mass suffering that we are not alone."

Today's Gospel lesson is a familiar comfort to many of us - the Beatitudes, they're called. And the Beatitudes are nothing less than the poetic lessons of what it is to live in God's love and receive God's love in return. The Beatitudes are the poetry of God's love, blessing, and comfort for us. They help us understand what the kingdom of heaven feels like, how we can make it so here on earth. And what a gift this poetry of God is for us as we remember our beloveds and hold our grief in tender care today.

Poetry often uses its sentence structure and word order to emphasize or encourage a point the author is making. The Beatitudes are poetic in this way. Each of these Beatitude statements includes two parts - "blessed" and "for". The first part of each sentence gives us a tangible quality to know, identify, and act upon - blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the merciful, and so on. These statements give us an

idea of what actually constitutes a blessing, where the space between us and God is just a little closer, where we learn what it is to lean into living as a human. These parts are the things we can do, our part to play in living out our faith.

And the for parts, these are the things that God does, that God ensures us of, God's responses to our actions. God's love and God's presence and God's blessing is not dependent on the blessing statements, but rather they provide us comfort. They provide us with directions for how to recognize that love of God that is already here for us in abundance. God tells us, through these words of Jesus, that we will be comforted, that we will receive mercy, that we will be called children of God. That even in the face of persecution, when we face battles and revulsion and evil being done against us, God still shows up for us.

It's almost unfathomable - even in the face of evil, in the face of revulsion and persecution, God tells us to rejoice and be glad? What? How? Because love wins.

Love wins so much that even after we die the kingdom of heaven is ours as a reward. Love wins so much that not even painful death on the cross could defeat the power of God's love in Jesus Christ. Love wins so much that we will be comforted, we will see the face of God even when things seem dark beyond our understanding. Love wins so much that even when we don't have a whole lot left to give, God turns those little bits into blessings for ourselves and others. Love wins in the face of evil and persecution. Love wins in the face of any threat or hardship or battles we face. Love wins because love is from God, and it's the realest thing we have.

Many of us are fighting the hardest battles we face in life at this time. We deeply grieve in all kinds of ways. We grieve for our beloveds who have died. We grieve for some semblance of safety or peace or normalcy. We grieve family events, life milestones adapted, being able to hug our people safely. We fight the battle against our own brains when the voices of depression, anxiety, addiction, and all mental health struggles lie to us

every day. We fight financial woes and loss of income and what that means for our future. We grieve even planning for the future as freely as we once did. We grieve in ways that we're not quite sure words can cover - an ambiguous loss that's plagued us for months. And we certainly grieve the over 225,000 Americans and nearly 1.2 million people worldwide who have died from covid-19. What a loss, dear friends. So many saints now joined with God in heaven.

The people we know and love who have died, we can take comfort and know that with God, they're okay. They're going to be okay and they are deeply loved by God. We know they're okay because of God's great love for all humanity, because of the very real promises made to us in baptism and in the new life of the risen Jesus Christ who defeated the power of death. By God's great love, we are going to be okay too. We can even rejoice and be glad because we are part of a great communion of saints, on earth as it is in heaven, and for that we give God thanks. God will never abandon or forsake us, and that includes after death when we enter the heavenly kingdom. God assures us that we will be comforted, that we will receive mercy, that we will inherit the earth and see God because God's love always wins. For that great love, for the comfort and conviction and life we gain from God by the power of the Holy Spirit, we give unending thanks. Thanks be to God, Amen.