

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Romans 8:31-39

Sermon Title: "It's Okay"

Rev. Josh Fitterling

Death is an inevitable part of life as blatantly obvious and contradictory as that may sound. In the poetic words of Ecclesiastes which we heard this morning, we are reminded of all the seasons of life including "a time to die". And this is a part of life which we all learn about eventually, often times at some point in childhood. Do you remember when you learned about death? Growing up on the farm, with different types of animals, this was where I first experienced what it was like to have something die. And I think that for many kids, it is in these experiences with animals and pets that we learn the blessings of life and often experience the first sorrow of loss. But I had never really thought about the people in my life eventually dying - to think about having someone close to me, someone within my immediate family die, was not something that I had ever thought about before. That was until I was watching TV one evening with my grandmother - and this story is one that I reflect on each year at some point or another, so some of you may have heard me tell this story before.

Now, my grandmother was not very picky about what we watched on television. But there was one show that she loved to watch and would always make a point of commandeering the TV for that time slot when it would come on most weekends. It was the Bill Gaither Homecoming Special. Not sure how many of you ever heard of the Gaither Homecoming. It was and still is a musical tour of many talented singers and performers organized by Bill and Gloria Gather, which takes place, going from city to city, and singing gospel music to large crowds of folks. And nearly every weekend in my youth, they would have a half hour special on TV where you could purchase their latest performance on VHS at the time, or just enjoy a few musical selections from their latest concert. And seeing these little infomercials with a glimpse of some gospel music was what my grandmother loved to watch.

One week, when I was maybe 10 or 11 years old, I remember we were watching this together and a song came on that I had never heard before – an old gospel hymn entitled “What a Day That Will Be” – a hymn that speaks of the afterlife. And the refrain said these words which still stick in my memory to this day: “What a day that will be, when my Jesus I shall see. When I look upon his face, the one who saved me by his grace. And when he takes me by the hand and leads me to the promise land, what a day, glorious day, that will be.” As they were singing, my grandmother said something to me in a very casual, “matter-of-fact” kind of way. She said, “I want this to be sung at my funeral.” Now, again, I had never thought of someone so close to me actually dying, though death was certainly not a foreign concept in my upbringing. So as I sat there, I had a mixture of feelings. The first was denial. I wanted to say, “Grandma, don’t talk like that! You are not going to die!” And the second reaction was one of feeling honored. I thought, “Wow! My grandmother trusts me with something so important regarding a final wish of hers.” None of these feelings did I express to her as I was in a bit of shock and she didn’t even really react as she just kept listening to the show and was rocking away in her rocking chair. It was almost like she didn’t say anything at all. With both of these feelings that I was experiencing, denial and honor, I knew I needed to do something. So I went and grabbed a pen and a post-it note and I wrote down the name of the song out of fear that I would forget and would let my grandmother down with this wish of hers. I kept that post-it for a long time and would occasionally find the song to listen to it again so as to never forget her wish.

About 15 years later, she passed away. And I still remembered the song and as I grieved her death, I listed to the words of this song again and again. How the verses remind us that there will be no sorrow there and no more burdens to bear. No more sickness (she was so sick at the end of her life) and no more pain (she could breathe easily once more after COPD had taken a hold of her lungs). And I thought about how all of these words of an assured promise brought peace and comfort to my grandmother – the thought

that she was ready to look upon the face of Jesus and feel that wholeness – this brought me comfort and even, in the midst of the grief, made me smile.

We all have lost people close to us and likely we each have people that we miss today. But on this All Saints' Day, we remember that death is not the end. Death does not have the final word. As Paul reminds us in the reading from his letter to the Romans, love, love has the final word. For in love, we will never be separated from God. And though this day of remembering may bring some tears into our eyes as we think of loved ones gone, may the promises bring us even the tiniest of smiles.

Beloved People of God, life is made up of many seasons and on this day, as we remember the saints that have gone on before us, we all may find ourselves in different places, feeling different things in these moments in which we share. And no matter what we are feeling today as we remember, mourn again perhaps, celebrate, and cherish the promise of our God, the primary message I want you to leave with today is that, no matter what you are feeling, no matter how you grieve, no matter how you mourn, no matter how you celebrate the life of a beloved, "it's okay". We all go through the seasons of life in different ways, experiencing different emotions, at different times, no right or wrong answer, just part of the seasons and again, no matter what season of life you are in, it's okay and it will be okay. For the things about seasons are that they last only for a time. As people of faith, we are reminded that death is just another season of life which passes into eternity. And through Jesus Christ, may we remember that this is the eternal season of beauty, of bounty, of peace. This is the season of being home. A season in which my grandmother rests, in which the beloved people you remember today rest, and a season we too will enter one day – and I bet it too will make us smile. Thanks be to God! Amen.