Sermon for The Feast of All Faithful Departed (“All Souls”)

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, October 28, 2018

Text: John 14:2

Title: Room enough

Up until the early 20th century, the front room of an American house was generally called a “parlor,” as it is in most other former British colonies. This space was used to welcome guests, entertain visitors, and catch up – the name of the room actually coming from the French verb to speak, “parler.” But in addition to these ordinary uses, the parlor had another important function: it was the room in the house where, after a member of the family died, his or her body would be laid out prior to burial. Before the rise of modern medicine, people were born in their homes, they lived in their homes, and they died in their homes, and when they did they stayed in their homes until their immortal souls were commended back to God and their earthly remains committed to the ground.

But around the end of World War I, the name of this room changed for two related reasons. First, with so many bodies coming back from the war, many embalmed in anticipation of the long journey home, a traditional laying out, or wake, wasn’t really an option. Families needed help receiving and caring for the remains of their dearly departed, and, slowly, funeral parlors began to spring up to meet this need. Then, in 1918 – exactly 100 years ago - a vicious strain of Spanish influenza swept the globe. The pandemic was so widespread that an estimated 500 million people got sick, a full third of the world’s population at the time, and 50 million died. Between 1917 and 1918 alone, average life expectancy in the U.S. fell 12 years.\textsuperscript{1} As people continued to lay their recently departed family members in the parlor, over and over and over again, many started to refer to it as “The Death Room” instead. It fit. And it stuck.

As conditions improved in the following years, and soldiers came home to start a family more often than to be laid to rest, \textit{The Ladies Home Journal} started printing blueprints for the homes of those families, and editor Edward Bok suggested the time had come to let go of “The Death Room.” And this is how most all of us came to have a “Living Room” in our homes Bok’s fitting, more upbeat, alternative nomenclature. After all, as modern hospitals arose, fewer people died at home, and regardless of where they died, those funeral parlors, which never really

\textsuperscript{1} For more information on the pandemic, see https://www.cdc.gov/features/1918-flu-pandemic/index.html.
went away, offered a convenient place for a wake. The home, it seemed, was now reserved for living, parlor and all.

And so, in effect, and as reflected in our language, we outsourced death and dying, setting in safely outside the boundaries of our most intimate spaces, our most intimate thoughts, as far away as possible. With the rise of skilled nursing units and assisted living, preventative care, supplements, the fitness industry, vaccines and fresh-organic-local-whole-foods, we’ve managed to push this natural process ever further outward, the boundary of illness and decline receding further back. At least, for a time.

For people so supposedly committed to objective truth and scientific proof, we remain remarkably committed to the illusion that we will not die. That is, until that illusion comes crashing down on us. Until someone we love is lost, remission slips into relapse, the tests come back with irregularities, the phone rings in the night or on a sunny afternoon. We can change our place on the board and invent new rules for the game, but certain things – cards or dice? the number of players, where we begin and where we end – well, they are simply beyond our control. And end we do. And end we will.

This is this sobering truth that confronts us on the cusp of the observance of Allhallowtide, a lesser known tridium of the Church marked by All Saint’s Eve (a.k.a., Halloween), All Saints Day, and All Souls Day, which we anticipate this morning. While All Saints has remained a primary feast in most Churches around the world, All Souls was all but lost to obscurity in many Protestant traditions, the need for remembering, praying for and to and with those ordinary souls we’ve each loved and lost, seeming less urgent in a cosmos purged of purgatory. But, in truth, where All Souls has declined, All Saints – originally intended to celebrate the heroes of our faith - has expanded to meet the deep, human need to draw near and commune with those with whom we once shared this earthly life – who remain so much a part of us though we see them no longer.

Last weekend, at our annual Diocesan Convention, lay and ordained delegates were invited to reflect on a favorite Saint at different reflective moments throughout the day. I was struck by how many of those stories celebrated not a hero or a martyr but a grandmother, a mentor, someone who reached out in love at one point or another and helped the speaker become more fully themselves. One man, raised in a Hispanic and deeply Catholic home, spoke about his finally coming out in college, consumed with fear and shame and a tremendous sense that he
would lose everything if he ever acknowledged this truth but that he simply couldn’t live a lie any longer. As his grades declined and his spirit sagged, he was called into the office of his advisor – a nun, naturally – who pressed him hard, encouraging him to open up. Finally, bereft, desperate, he said, “sister, I think I’m gay.” She stood up, and his heart dropped, countless memories of rulers across the knuckles running through his head as she walked over to him. And then, much to his surprise, she took his round, soft cheeks in his hands and said, “Do you know how loved you are?”

Another person spoke of his grandmother, a deeply faithful descendant of slaves and lifelong Episcopalian, who watched in horror as her young grandson joined a Philadelphia gang and dipped his toe into theft and petty crime. She prayed for him every day, prayed God would make a way for him where none was yet clear. And he believes it was through her prayers, and her commitment, that he stumbled into a Boy Scout troop that turned him around, opened doors, and saved his life. Another, a priest, qualified his words by acknowledging that his person didn’t fit the traditional definition of a saint, but that he would speak of Matthew Shephard nonetheless, and went on to reflect on how the recently announcement that Matthew’s remains would be interred at our Washington National Cathedral had deeply moved him, stirred him, inspired him. (This happened on Friday, in case you missed it, and it was a powerful moment indeed.)

A nun. A grandmother. A stranger. These are among the dearly departed we remember today, whom we hold in love and light, whom reach out to in hope and heartbreak. Add to that list a mother, a father, a daughter; a husband, a wife, a son; a best friend, a fellow soldier, a longtime parishioner. Add to that list another ordinary, grace-drenched, complicated life – a life of glorious days and disappointments, marvelousness and mistakes, so human, so holy, not because they were so good but because God is so good, and God managed, through those great and sometimes grizzly details, to shine.

Jesus tells us that in God’s house there are many mansions, many rooms. Room enough for the living. Room enough for the dying. Room enough for the growing and the declining, the faithful and the fearful. Room enough for us. Room enough for all. Today, we are invited to linger in God’s parlor – that in between place, where visitors are welcomed and guests become friends; where old ties are rekindled and hearts are broken open. It doesn’t make sense that such
a place, such a time, exists. But we don’t have to understand it to enjoy it, anymore than we need understand God’s blessing or God’s mercy in order to receive and relish them.

Just come – come share the feast with those whose earthly pilgrimage has come to an end. Come enjoy the conversation, the connection, the communion that awaits. Come discover that those closer we become to God, the closer we become to one another, in this world and the next. Come with your grief and your gratitude, your hope and your heartbreak. There is room at the table, and God, the author of our salvation, has so much more to say. Amen.