

Sermon Isaiah 25:6-9

‘The gentle touch of God’

All Saints Sunday

November 3rd, 2024

Every fall when I see the leaves turn colorful and tumble to the ground, I recall a poem I had to learn by heart back in school. This poem just captures the mood of the season beautifully and profoundly. It is by Bohemian poet Rainer Maria Rilke and is called ‘Fall’, and I am reading an English translation by Guntram Deichsel:

The leaves are falling, falling as from far
Where distant with'ring gardens grace the skies,
They're falling with a gesture that denies.

And in the nights the heavy earth falls by
Into the loneliness, from a far star.

We all are falling. This hand falls, as it extends.
And take a look at others. It's in them all.

Let me stop here for now. I guess you gathered that this is not just a poem about fall, but about our finite existence as well. It's a poem about dying, about death. What a great thing to teach a bunch of teenagers! And I have to admit, I may have learned the words back then, but I didn't appreciate them. I was 13 or 14 at that point, I was young, I was strong, I felt invincible, immortal even. Why all this gloom and doom?

It wasn't until some years later that I remembered those words that I had to learn by heart and that somehow survived in the depth of my heart – and those words have become increasingly meaningful to me. I guess that's what happens when you get older – and when you are in a profession that deals with dying and death on a regular basis.

But what I've found is that people in general don't like to think about the finality of life here on earth, that people don't like to think about their mortality. People don't like to think about or talk about death. And maybe that's in part because of our culture: it is a culture that celebrates life and youth and youthfulness - I mean, plastic surgeons make a fortune – it is a culture in which we do everything in our power to prolong life, even though the quality of life may be gone.

Death becomes a joke at Halloween. And then we nimbly jump over those days on our church calendar which deal with mortality and eternity, and start decking the halls with boughs of holly, 'cause it's the season to be jolly. And many chase the darkness of the season away with exceedingly bright light and sometimes gaudy light displays.

I would argue that, in our culture, it's hard to acknowledge mortality and death. We may even have forgotten how to grieve – or at least grieve properly. Partly, because the world tells us: get over it! Move on! Live life! That's what your dearly departed would have wanted you to do. So we often swallow up our grief, we hide it somewhere deep inside us.

Now we can try to shut out the thought of our mortality, but death at some point catches up with us – all of us, no matter, what skin color, what language, no matter if we are rich and powerful or poor and meek, young or old. Sometimes death sends us a cold shudder from afar, when we hear about the untimely death of people in the news – victims of terror and war, accidents, crime, or natural disasters.

Sometimes, someone we know dies. As we looked at this beautiful family tree of the saints here at Old Steeple Rev. Bonnie put together, you probably remembered quite a few of those named on it. With each name, there is a story, a memory, a relationship.

Sometimes, we lose someone who is really close to us – and, yes, it may be a pet, but then there are people: a friend, a spouse, a sibling, a parent, a child. In such times, we can't escape or deny the reality of death, but somehow have to deal with it.

And the older we get, the more people we lose. Just a couple of months ago, I lost a friend back in Germany to cancer – we attended seminary together. Same age as I. And I couldn't help but think, those strikes are getting closer and closer. And so when someone near and dear to us dies, yes, we are confronted with our own mortality and death. Try as we may, we can't escape it. Like the leaves in Rilke's poem, we all fall, often with a gesture that denies.

We are not the only ones who counter death with a gesture that denies. God does, too. Today's beautiful lesson from the book of Isaiah talks about this grand vision of eternity, when all people – and people – will be gathered on God's holy mountain and feast together. And while everyone is eating and feasting, and, as I assume, having a good time, God swallows up - gobbles up - death forever. God denies death its power. And then, with a startling physicality, God wipes away all tears from people's faces. God touches everyone, with this gentle gesture. Hush, my child. There is no reason to cry anymore. Everything is changed. The old is over and gone. This is the life that I have always intended for you and for all. Death is not the endgame.

In the gospels we have numerous accounts of the healing power of Jesus Christ. He even brings some people back to life: Lazarus, a young man, and the 12 year old daughter of the synagogue leader Jairus. Jesus has compassion with those who grieve. As a human being, Jesus knows about the hurt we feel when someone we love dies. Jesus cares. Jesus even cries. And in and through these stories we learn how God speaks a resounding 'No' to the power of death.

And these stories from our scriptures give us hope and confidence that death does not have the last word. First and foremost we see and experience this through the cross and the empty tomb on Easter morning. Christ's resurrection is the ultimate gesture that denies.

This may not entirely take our fear of death away. This may not even comfort us entirely as we grieve the loss of a person who is close to us. Death is still a reality, a reality which is often harsh. But in our fear, in our grief, in our anger, we can have defiant hope in God's life which will overcome all.

And so in this dark season, and on this day of remembrance and mourning, I invite you to light a candle for the people you've lost. Light a candle for all your grief. Light a candle as a sign of the hope we have in the resurrection of all God's saints, and life eternal to the fullest which God intends for all.

This world doesn't need more denial. This world needs hope. The hope that love will have the last word over hatred and indifference, that reconciliation will have the last word over violence, the hope that God has the last word over death. And we are the bearers of this hope.

Which brings me back to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. He was a faithful Catholic, and he knew about hope. And so, in closing, let me recite the entire poem 'Fall':

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Where distant with'ring gardens grace the skies,
They're falling with a gesture that denies.

And in the nights the heavy earth falls by
Into the loneliness, from a far star.

We all are falling. This hand falls, as it extends.
And take a look at others. It's in them all.

And yet there's One, holding this fall
With endless gentleness in both his hands.

Amen

