

Sermon All Saints Day 2021 “So Many Tears” Rev. Anjanette K Bandel

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This has been a hard year for so many people. Likely that is an understatement or understood by all of us today, but perhaps all the more by those who have been directly touched by death and loss in this past year. On a global level, the death toll this past Monday topped **5 million** people and those numbers hold significance as they are brought closer with a national toll of loss, our state, our county and so on. The reading from Isaiah uses the image of death as a “shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations;” and never before have I been so aware of that power of death on a larger scale.

And, for many of you here today, death and loss is very raw and recent. Even if the death itself was not in any way related to the virus, COVID deeply impacted HOW we are able to respond to death with limitations on how we could safely gather, how many people could be with someone in the hospital when things were critical or simply the ability to be present, to be WITH someone when they are grieving.

While it is now just a little over a year ago, I remember when Bethel began to share the news of Pastor Bob Onkka’s death with the congregation and community. Pastor Onkka was our beloved Pastor of Visitation for many years and after his full retirement many of you would look forward to seeing him and shaking his hand as you came to worship each week. A year ago the virus numbers were rapidly rising, there was still no vaccine, things were moving into indoor settings again and funerals and memorials were severely limited in capacity numbers. Pastor Onkka’s family chose to have a private immediate family only service here in our sanctuary so as to keep their family and other people well. This was the right and good choice for them. Yet I remember thinking how full the church might have been were the circumstances different. Now,

to be clear, for Pastor Onkka, whether there were 10 or 500 people at his funeral, it wouldn't have mattered to him, what mattered was that the Gospel was proclaimed and the promise of life with Jesus now and forever was affirmed. But for those of us who needed to say our "good-bye's" or have opportunity to gather and laugh and cry and remember and hug and celebrated this very special man, there continues to be a hole of unattended grief that feels empty.

Unattended grief is heartbreaking because loss changes us in significant ways and death is a shroud and a sheet that can hover over us if we do not acknowledge its power. Yet, just as the reading from Isaiah reminds us of death is described as the ultimate enemy of life, Isaiah promises the Lord will "swallow up death forever". And then goes on to show us a God with the loving qualities of a parent tending their child, "Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces." Like a "superhero" when the villain is finally defeated and then this larger than life person stoops down to assure a little child who is crying at the terror of it all and says, "everything will be okay" and wipes away their tears. Here is a powerful and mighty God/Lord of hosts who can slay the dragons of death but in the same foul swoop can stop to tend to the grief and tears and wipe them away with gentleness and grace.

On an All Saints Eve/Day we pause to remember that God has a heart that breaks along with us when we experience death. Our Gospel reading contains the shortest verse in the New Testament. That verse is "Jesus wept". When Jesus' friend, Lazarus dies we see a rare moment of Jesus' raw emotion. Not only is it reported that there were tears of Lazarus' family but tears of many who gathered that day and that all of this sadness "greatly disturbed Jesus and moved him"... moved him to express his own tears of sadness. What we learn is that Jesus "feels" the loss and doesn't stand outside of it but enters into the same grief of those tears.



In 2008 while traveling with the Bethel Mission Trip to Saltillo, Mexico, I had the opportunity to stop with the group in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and visit the Oklahoma City National Memorial on the site of the bombing of the Federal Building that happened in 1995. The memorial provides “holy ground” for the continued grief and loss experienced in this act of terrorism and in the painful death of life including many children. Across the street from the memorial is a statue titled, “And Jesus Wept”....

It is a powerful reminder of a God who deeply enters into life and death and feels the sorrow we experience in times of unspeakable loss. I think it is also significant that the statue is white and features Jesus shrouded in a white robe. I’m not sure if that holds significance for the sculptor, but hearing our story of the raising of Lazarus, there is something powerful about when he emerges from the tomb upon Jesus’ word, “Lazurus, come out!”

How is it possible that a man, dead for days could emerge from the grave and live again? Wrapped in the shroud of linens that had bound him to death, a practice of preparing a body for burial for his time and culture, but now, because of the power of Jesus, those who witnessed the living Lazarus are instructed to “unbind him” from that shroud so he can freely live and move, be alive again!

Here is a glimpse of what Jesus’ own death would reveal. Remember how on that first Easter morning when the women go to the tomb and are overcome with grief, the stone is rolled

away and the tomb is empty but what remains in that “shroud” of death... the linens that covered Jesus are cast aside because God has defeated death through Jesus death AND his resurrection. Lazarus’ resurrection is a glimpse of that Easter morning triumph.

And today, in light of all that Jesus has done for you and for me, though the sting of death is real, we know that death is not victorious. The New Testament book of Revelation gives us greater vision for this. Echoing the words of Isaiah with a God who feels our loss, who “wipes every tear from our eyes” and boldly asserts, that all things will be made new. “Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” There is one who holds the beginning and the end, our “alpha and omega” and so we have nothing to fear.

There are so many tears today, this is true. Voltaire has said, “Tears are the silent language of grief.” Yet, tears also can express our trust in the good news of promise we have in Christ this day and always. May the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.