

November 3, 2019 All Saints Day
Dr. Jane Florence
Title: "Immortal Loving"
Text: Genesis 49, 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8a, 13



This is the twelfth All Saints Sunday since my parents died. My parents shaped me all my life, none more so than during their final years.

Dad worked hard all his life from when he was just a boy until he was an old man. He worked as a department store manager; retail work is long hours. In all my years growing up, I think we took three vacations. He always felt he had to be at the store or needed to be available in case something came up. In pre-cell phone days, leaving town meant being unreachable. In the last years of his life, when long work days had taken toll on his knees and restocking storeroom shelves had punished his back, he was eager to pass on his life's wisdom to me. When he saw me working long hours, pushing through difficult times, he would say, "Stop and smell the roses. Take care of your health and enjoy it, you won't always have it."

My stoic mother was confined to bed after she fell and broke her hip in her last year. She was afraid to go to sleep at night. She was afraid she wouldn't wake. As I sat beside her bed one night, I saw a tear roll down her cheek. This was my mother who I had never seen cry- not when her father died- not when her mother died - not when her grandson was murdered. I asked her, "Mom, what's wrong? Are you in pain?" All she said into the darkness of the night was, "Life is just so short."

Their most profound lessons to me were not so much on how they lived, but in how they wished they had lived. I give thanks for their lives, for their love and the wisdom they shared as they reached the end of their earthly journeys. I practice Rose Smelling often. Literally, each time I pass by one blooming along a neighbors sidewalk, I bend low to catch a whiff of sweet rose, and I think of Dad. Each time I gather up my granddaughter into my arms every chance I get, I wonder how much of her life will I get to witness unfolding. I think of my mother watching her granddaughters grow into fine young women. I am grateful for the gift of life each day, and I remember my parent's words.

Poet Mary Oliver's words have been especially poignant these last months as her concluding questions of her poem "Summer Day" haunts my thoughts, "Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

As a pastor, I have had the privilege of journeying alongside the dying. Each one makes the journey differently. I have seen folks who have entered last days with faithful assurance; I've seen folks who have wandered into the unknown with uncertainties. I have seen those who have wished death to come quickly and those who were not ready to meet it. I would agree with rabbi Harold Kushner who writes, "Most people are not afraid of dying; they are afraid of not having lived... People can accept the inescapable fact of mortality. What frightens them more is the dread of insignificance, the notion that we will be born and live and one day die and none of it will matter."

Does how we live our life matter? What is it that gives joy and brings meaning to life? Questions certainly asked in reflection back upon life - deathbed reflections; but what about those question shaping how we live the present.

The Washington Post published an op-ed this week titled, “Why millennials are skipping church and not going back.”¹ The data comes from the findings of two surveys released this month. Analyzing 2017 data from the American Time Use Survey, economist Michelle Freeman of the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that while millennials are more highly educated and spend more time working than their older counterparts, they have stepped back dramatically from religious activities. Millennials are people ages 23 to 38 in case you were wondering. In 2019, roughly two-thirds attend worship services “a few times a year” or less, and 4 in 10 say they seldom or never go. So what does that mean for those of us trying to prop up a dying institution? The article goes on to say, “Religious and other civic organizations will atrophy — and not just from lack of funds. Faith and practice can’t persevere through our generation without attendance, and neither can the hope they tend to bring.” That’s concerning. But what is more concerning, I think, so what does this mean to the millennials. We are missing them, but what are they missing by not being here? The author cites other longer-range studies that indicate that millennials are much more lonely; they are engaging in less physical intimacy, and in fewer long-term relationships.

The faith community, I propose, is a unique place where one can wrestle with those ultimate questions we all face: Does how we live our life matter? What is it that gives joy and brings meaning to life? And the faith community, I propose, offers a unique place of relationship, identity and belonging.

Faith community here is a gathering where we can turn to scripture to hear the wisdom of our ancestors as they wrestled with these timeless questions as well. The Old Testament figure, Jacob, presents powerful story of the Hebrew people. The Israelites worship The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob is listed in the trinity of Hebrew faithful who carry the covenant of God. His name is used to identify which god the Hebrews worship in a culture of many gods. Now one might think Jacob must have been quite a saint to have one’s name linked as the identifier for God. Or maybe not.

As a young man, Jacob lived up to his name, which means “Grabby”. He grabbed his mother’s attention as her favorite. He grabbed his brothers birthright and blessing by deceiving his blind old father. He grabbed his father-in-laws flocks and herds. He ran for his life more than once as those he swindled and cheated vowed to kill him. By all accounts, he would not be a poster boy for God. However, he had his moments of redemption as well. Moments when God appears to him in dreams and visions. Moments when he wrestles with God. Moments when he comes to terms with his wayward ways and chooses to live differently. The end of Genesis shows us Jacob on his deathbed reminiscing about his life. He has lived a long time; he traveled far in his life. He “has known wealth and poverty, triumph and loss. But as he looks back over this whole life, two memories stand out.

On his deathbed, he remembers the night when God appeared to him and assured him that, despite his faults and his failings, he would grow up to be a good person and make a difference to the world, and he remembers that once he knew what it felt like to truly love someone. He learned that love and memory are stronger than death. Goodness and love are two of the experiences that assure us that our lives have mattered to the world, that we have not lived in vain.”

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-millennials-are-skipping-church-and-not-going-back/2019/10/27/0d35b972-f777-11e9-8cf0-4cc99f74d127_story.html

Thornton Wilder concludes his novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, with these words: “There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love.”

The world goes on without us. But it goes on differently - at least in our corner of the world - because of the love we share. Paul describes this love when he writes his first letter to the Corinthians, “Love is patient and kind and not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all... Faith, hope and love abide. The greatest of these is love.” Godly Love never ends. First Corinthians reminds us that Love remains. It never ends. Love does not die. Love is immortal. Love is from God: God is love.

When we truly love and care for others, when we live lives of compassion and generosity, when we share and give deliberately, we live in God- in this life and in the one to come.

Today, we give thanks for those who have gone before us to share their wisdom of life through relationships and story. We give thanks to those who have gone before to build a community of faith where we can seek meaning and belonging. Today, and each day, we give thanks for Divine love that transcends and lives in all.

Go forth to celebrate the Divine Love we encounter here. Go forth to invite all to our celebration of life.