

Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

All of us are embedded in stories. Our memory banks and our boxes of old photos tell these stories sometimes in great detail and at other times in a foggy haze of how things used to be. Our lives are stories that unfold gradually and give our lives meaning and definition. While the stories may unfold gradually, our life here on earth goes by very fast. Where does the time go? But all of us have unfinished stories. We don't know what's going to happen tomorrow or even at this end of this day.

This past week has been a perfect storm in terms of my own story. It started out with great preparations for Halloween and a parade through the shopping center next door with a gaggle of little superheroes and princesses armed with plastic pumpkins to collect goodies from Panera and Trader Joe's and Bob's Furniture Store. The following day was All Saints. That evening I got a call from my brother-in-law. He called to tell me that our Aunt Betty had died the night before just before midnight on Halloween. It didn't come as a big surprise or even as a source of great sadness. She was 93 years old and had been living in a nursing home for nearly a decade. Hers was not a particularly happy life and in some respects, I felt like she had been released from a great deal of sadness and disappointment. But it was a death nevertheless. It was an end to her story in this life. She and I have the same name ... Elizabeth Tomlinson ... except that she spelled Elizabeth with an 's' and I spell it with a 'z.'

Suddenly the whole meaning of All Saints Day came into sharp focus. She and I were now on different sides of the veil. The following day, I presented my genogram to my Family Systems class. In a moment of temporary insanity I had volunteered to be the first one to present a genogram. I had done one once before ... years ago when I was working on my Masters in Social Work ... and I thought the exercise was fun. I had forgotten how time consuming it was. For those of you old enough to remember diagramming sentences in English class, a genogram is a bit like a diagram except instead of placing words of a sentence on different lines, you draw representations of people ... males are squares and females are circles. Let me show you.....

Display genogram

When I did this the first time ... about 20 years ago ... my husband and I were at the bottom of the diagram with just our three children below us. This time, we were the next rung up with our children and their spouses and our grandchildren below us. We had moved up. Aunt Betty was on the rung above us and now it was time to put an X across her name and her date of death across from her date of birth. She was the last of her little family of four and I realized that her story and this family's story had come to an end. But they were all still there on the genogram... still part of our family and still part of us. Eventually, my name will have an X across it, too, with the date of my death across from the date of my birth and I will still be part of this family. But earthly death just seems so final. Sometimes it's even hard to say the word. We use euphemisms like "passed away" or "expired" or "isn't with us any more" rather than say the word "died."

But it isn't final. There's more to the story than what we know in this life.

We are Christians. We are the people of the resurrection. We are the people of hope. We talk about the Communion of saints ... of all the people who have gone before us. Our hope and our belief is that we will be reunited with them when our earthly life ends and we cross the veil into the next life.

Jesus did that for us. Jesus showed us what that would look like. We are the believers of the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Every Sunday morning we say together the Nicene Creed which is the statement of our beliefs. We believe that God loved us so much that he was willing to come and live among us ... to experience life as we do ... to experience not only the joys of this life, but the pain and suffering as well. When he preached on the mountain by the Sea of Galilee, he told us what kind of life circumstances would be honored by God. He told us about blessings. He told us that when we suffer in this life, God will be with us and we will be honored. We will be blessed. We are accessible to God and God is accessible to us when the times are tough.

The crowd who gathered to hear Jesus preach believed that only the righteous were able to look forward to eternal glory with God. The teachings of the Pharisees in Jesus' day had people believing that the only righteous ones were the ones who never broke any of the commandments or the laws. Jesus gave us a different way of looking at righteousness. Jesus told us that righteousness is not about our goodness, but about God's grace. God loved us enough to come down here and get us. And when life gets unbearable, Jesus goes there with us. He descended into hell after his earthly death and he will follow us wherever we need for him to be ... even if it turns out to be hell on earth. And during the darkest moments of our

lives, it sometimes feels that way. Jesus never abandons us. He never leaves us to struggle with our pain alone. "Hold tight to me," he seems to say!

Righteousness, you see, is all about our relationship with God. It's about aligning ourselves with God. It's not about whether or not we walk around this world with haloes around our heads which none of us can do anyway. The story that permeates us as Christians is the story about our love affair with Jesus and his love affair with us. And no one ever has or ever will love us more! The beauty is, it's a story that has no end. It's a story with a huge transformation of us at the time that our earthly life is over. Jesus showed us how that would work when he was raised from the dead.

When he died on the cross, clearly he had come to the end of the story of his life on this earth. But when he arose, he showed us that his earthly death was NOT the end of the story!! There's more! There's another chapter. What he showed us was life eternal. What he showed us is that life continues, just in a different form. He appeared to many earthly people AFTER his earthly death. And he continues to come to each one of us who call on him and believe in him.

The reading this morning in I John reminds us of the extent of the love that our heavenly Father has for us in that we are called children of God. We belong to him. We human beings claim our own children. We say, "That's my child!" And God claims each one of us. We are God's children. We are part of God's genogram!! And just because an X is written across our names when our earthly life is over, doesn't mean we aren't still a part of the family. Those who have gone before us are still part of us and we are part of them. They are our people, just as we are God's people. That's exactly what we celebrate today. That's exactly what we remember today.

In a few minutes we will speak their names outloud and we will light a candle to remind us of the divine spark that we knew in them and we will sound a bell to celebrate who they are. We hold them in our hearts and in our memories. They are with us. When you come to the rail this morning to take communion, bring them with you! They are still part of the family. They are still part of the story. They are still part of your story. And nothing can ever change that.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.