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10/31/21—University Presbyterian Church
Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

GRAVESIDE CONFESSIONS

Most people are surprised when I confess that I prefer presiding over funerals more than weddings. And almost every pastor I know will admit to the same thing. Before you think we clergy are a morbid bunch, let me explain why. Many clergy hold such opinions in part because of all the cultural and social expectations that are associated with weddings. The wedding couple have planned their day with great care for months or even years. They want their day to be “perfect.” And so there are all these heightened emotions about how everything has to look and how everyone has to behave. And truthfully, for a lot of couples and their guests, the wedding ceremony is really just a prelude to what they regard as the main event—which is the reception, the big party. While this is not true for all weddings, it is true for most. In contrast, most of those who attend a funeral come with a desire and a need for some kind of spiritual comfort and guidance. And thus at funerals there is greater receptivity to what we clergy as spiritual leaders can hopefully provide.

But for me, the reason I like funerals is also theological. Funerals are occasions when we rehearse the story of God in our lives. And that makes the funeral, any funeral, a confession of faith. At the funeral we declare what we believe. The funeral is really a kind of drama in which we rehearse the activity of God in our lives. You may think that the central figure at a funeral is the deceased person. But according to our Presbyterian theology, the central figure at every funeral is God. God is the protagonist, the leading actor in the funeral service. And the life of the deceased becomes the stage upon which this leading actor has been at work.

All Saints Day functions much like a collective funeral because on this day, all of us gather to remember loved ones who have died. All Saints also serves as an occasion to consider our own lives. One day we will die and at our funerals others will reflect on how this leading actor, God, was at work in our lives. So today we consider the funeral and how the entire funeral is a drama in which we confess our faith.

Imagine that a coffin lies before us. Someone you know lies in that coffin—a friend, a family member, a colleague. Even as we may be overcome with sorrow, we begin the service with gratitude and praise. Fundamental to any funeral is gratitude to the God of Life. At this funeral God is acknowledged as the Source of this precious gift of life. Most importantly, we proclaim that God is on the side of life. God cherishes the Creation, works to bring healing to us and this world, and constantly draws close to humanity in love. At the funeral we give thanks for God's life-giving activity in the life of the deceased, from birth to death, and how God walked steadfastly with them throughout their journey on this earth. And we give thanks that this same God can be counted upon to accompany all of us through this earthly journey.

As you sit before the coffin, however, you might be privately remembering all the ways the deceased person was not always good or loving. Maybe you will recall all the ways they were irritating or difficult to get along with, or how they wasted their life and talents, or were unfaithful in their marriage, or cheated on their taxes, or were self-righteous and conceited. One day, others may think such thoughts about us as they sit before our coffin! In truth, we are all broken and imperfect. The old fashioned word for that is sin. Sin takes many forms but everyone one of us falls short of who God created us to be. We all know brokenness from which we cannot save ourselves. We hurt people, act selfishly, abuse our bodies, and participate in systems that oppress others and harm our planet. Every one of us stands in need God's love and

mercy. As a result, a core element to the funeral is our gratitude for God's Grace—God's love and forgiveness—which is woven into the fabric of our daily lives. God's grace is a gift, not something we earn through good behavior or status. Perhaps the person lying in that coffin was a beloved "saint" of the community. Or perhaps the person was known by all to be a deeply broken and flawed individual. Maybe no one even liked them! Our emotions toward those two deaths may be very different but our response of faith, our confession of faith at the funeral remains the same. We give thanks in both situations for God's astonishing love and forgiveness showered equally upon us all. No one lies beyond God's love and mercy.

What does God's grace look like? Well, all we have to do is look at Jesus to see God's grace. Jesus is the embodiment of God's grace. In Jesus, God became human and drew close to humanity with love and forgiveness to save us from all types of death. At a funeral we are keenly focused on the reality of someone's physical death—a person has died. But long before we draw our final breath, our lives have been filled with a wide variety of deaths: our struggles and sins, tragedies and losses, addictions and destructive habits, and the priorities that harm others and our planet. So many forces and events rob us of life! But Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly! Jesus taught us God's way of love, compassion, mercy, sacrifice, humility, service, and justice so that we might know salvation from the grip of death and darkness and may be freed to enjoy abundant, lasting life—while we breathe and walk upon this earth as well as beyond the grave. The great drama at work in the life of the deceased, the great drama at work on the stage of your life and mine, is the ever-present activity of God's grace overcoming the forces of death. At a funeral we proclaim this saving love, this saving way, of Jesus. We proclaim the saving grace of God upon the one in the coffin and we recall that while we are yet

sinner, God moves across the stage of our lives with this same saving love, guiding us in the way of true life.

But now the earthly life of the one in the coffin is over. And that then sets the stage for the last incredible activity of the Great Protagonist of our earthly drama: the Resurrection. Death fools us into thinking that the drama is over, that the story for the person in the coffin has reached its end. But God throws us a plot twist! Death is not the end of the drama at all! In the Resurrection of Jesus, we are shown that not even the grave can defeat the God of Life. We read today in John's gospel about the raising of Lazarus—a story that foreshadows Jesus' own resurrection, and a story that foreshadows God's power to raise us to new life beyond the grave. At a funeral we proclaim that death is not the end of our story. The one lying there in the coffin? God has raised them to new life. The coffin is not our final destination. With death the curtain may have closed on our earthly story, but a new life, a transformed life awaits us. It is hard for us to even imagine what this transformed life will look like, although the writer of Revelation tries. In the passage we read from Revelation, the writer is imagining the ultimate transformation and healing God will bring to all people and the earth itself. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. And death itself will be no more. And God declares, "See, I am making all things new." We don't know exactly what the new life beyond death looks like, but in the face of death this is our affirmation of faith: our belief in a God who is making all things new.

You see, while death brings us to a funeral, the truth is that funerals are less about death than they are about life. Funerals bear witness to the presence and the power of the God of Life and the God of Love at every phase of our lives. And *that* is why I like funerals.