

“To Be Seen Weeping”
John 11:32-44

Pastor Liz Miller
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Earlier this week when I went to prepare our banner of the Saints for worship today, the names I took off it were over two years old. The last time we worshiped in the sanctuary for All Saints day was in 2019. Looking at those names and remembering what things were like when those people each died was the thousandth way I was reminded that we have been transformed these past two years, including the way we worship.

When we returned to worship in the sanctuary in September most of us, including me, assumed we would pick up right where we left off. We assumed that we would slide back into our pews and everything would feel normal. Or, if we were worshipping from home, we thought the hybrid services would feel like it did when worship was prerecorded or on Zoom.

Instead, we've had to relearn and learn for the first time what it means to have a hybrid worship service. We have had to lean into being a congregation that is both together and apart, one church in multiple locations. We are having to find new ways of feeling connected, building relationships, and being a part of Edgewood United Church because it is no longer as easy as feeling like you can worship on Sunday morning and get a full understanding of who we are or what we're about or how we might find our place in this church community. In some ways we are being asked to show up more fully. At times it has felt a little clumsy and awkward, but slowly we are finding new rhythms together.

We worshipped online for 78 Sundays. We have done hybrid worship for 8 Sundays. In a year from now, we'll have worshipped one way for 63 years, another way for a year and a half,

and a new way for one year and 8 weeks. It's going to take time. I lift up these changes because this change is symbolic of a lot of things we are relearning how to do. It seems like everything is either new or rusty from not being used or practiced in so long. This includes what we do on All Saints day, which is open ourselves up to the grief we feel when we lose someone we love and the gratitude we practice for all the ways their life impacted ours. It is a time to intentionally remember the ways their spirit is still very much alive within and around us.

When we were in the early throes of the pandemic, we shrank our lives. We tried to take up as little space as possible because we were saturated with stories of other people who had it worse. Even when we were those other people - I'm looking at you healthcare workers and teachers and parents of young children - we still made excuses as to why someone else's pain was bigger or more important or deserved to be more centered than ours did. There was big, big suffering at each of our doorsteps so we thought it would be best if we got out of the way. We made our own heartbreaks and losses seem inconsequential compared to global concerns because we worried that we would collectively reach the capacity for the amount of grief we could hold.

We did this thinking it would be two weeks, then a few months, and now years. And during that time, losses kept coming. All sorts of losses like jobs and relationships and a way of life. But also the loss of people. Some of us said goodbye to parents. Some of us lost siblings and nieces and nephews without being able to travel across the country to say goodbye in person or to gather with family to grieve together or to embrace each other when we were gathered. Some of us lost spouses and have navigated life as a widow with fewer supports that we need. Some of us lost friends and coworkers, those people we spend countless hours with and who shape us as much as family does. Some of us did not get the goodbye we needed, or the comfort we craved. Some of us felt like the pandemic took away the time together that we would have normally had

in these transitional moments, and others felt cut off from some of the ways we would ordinarily grieve or receive care. Even those of us who lost people and felt like we were relatively fine would still admit that it was not the same as it was before.

As we navigate through the world as it is today, in all its shifts and newness, and as we think about what we want to take with us into the future, I urge us to reclaim our space to grieve, to feel, to sit with the losses and find ways to hold each other and honor each other's grief.

This story that we read of the raising of Lazarus only begins because Mary and Martha, and the people who are with them, are weeping. It is when Jesus sees them weep - publicly, messily, together weeping - that he is moved. Before there can be healing, before they can move forward, they need to weep and be seen weeping. What a message for us still today. It is a reminder to risk the vulnerability that comes from sharing our grief because in taking that risk, we might truly be seen. And it is only when someone sees us that they can begin to offer what we need or help us find our way toward hope.

It is the pouring out of tears, the rawness of emotions, that moves Jesus to tears. And it is in being moved that prompts him to bring Lazarus back to life, to reveal to Mary and Martha and their gathered family the full glory of a God who meets them in their grief, who weeps with them when they weep, who helps them find their way back to life when they had lost all hope.

After every death, there is a resurrection. There is a time when our grief consumes us - sometimes when the loss is a parent or grandparent who has lived a long, vibrant life it is a pre-grieving as we anticipate how hard it will be to say goodbye or we wonder what our lives will be like without them. Other times it is a grief that tears us open in ways we can't anticipate, following us wherever we go, creeping in when we least expect it or least want to acknowledge it. And when we have lost someone who is a part of the fiber of our being, that grief never

leaves. It shifts and takes new shape, but it is always with us. Part of what shifts over time is that we are able to move back toward life - to a resurrected life - where we can see evidence of their love and spirit still with us. Where we can see the gifts of that love made manifest in ways that feel new and sometimes surprising.

When I think about Jesus raising Lazarus and what that story might reveal about our world today, I think about what it means to know that Lazarus' life would continue to shape the world around him, would continue to bring comfort and peace to Mary and Martha and his community, would continue to inspire and be a source of strength and hope for those who need it. Even in death, there is new life waiting for us - new ways of understanding the love that connects us, new ways of moving through the world with the spirits of those we have lost.

Those revelations do not come immediately. They do not come all at once. But through our tears, through our willingness to grieve fully - there is a sacred opening that moves us toward a life that is connected with those who have gone before us and those who will come next.

Last Monday our Health Ministry Team held a beautiful service that honored everyone who has lost someone during the pandemic. We were all invited to submit names beforehand so that they could be read during the service. After Arlene read through the list, she asked us to lift up the names of other people we wanted to include. Sitting there I realized, I didn't add my Grandma Leila's name who died just this summer. I was too preoccupied thinking about everyone else's losses or worrying that the siblings and spouses that I knew were present had much more of a right to grieve, that it hadn't occurred to me to add my own family name. So I spoke her name out loud, Leila Miller, added her to the saints that surrounded us that night.

And on the way home, I remembered something I hadn't thought about in years. I remembered visiting her home in Oregon as a teenager and sitting at her kitchen table reading.

She was busy around me cooking and preparing a meal, but every time she walked by me, she grazed her fingers across my shoulders. She paused at one point and told me that she wanted me to feel her love in a way that would sink in to me differently than if she just told me, a love that felt as easy as brushing by and giving you goosebumps. My Grandma and I had a complicated relationship, but I remember what her touch felt like, and I remember that she loved me the best way that she knew how. Before I could more fully remember that, I first needed to say her name out loud, to acknowledge and honor the importance of her life.

If you have lost someone this past year, or if you have a loss that is still so deep you wonder how it could have possibly been longer than a year, we don't need you to minimize that loss. Your love, the person you grieve, lived a life that is worthy of your weeping. And we are here to hold that grief, to remind you that God is with you in the tears and the sorrow and the memories.

Much of what we do in worship is rehearsal for the rest of life - we pray to prepare ourselves, we tell stories in the hopes of making connections with our own stories, we do things like honoring our saints and eating together because it takes practice. We do it again and again to remind each other of what matters most and who matters most. And we do it all looking for evidence that God is with us, grateful when we find it together. We invite God in to see our full messy selves, to see us weeping and grieving and full of gratitude for this life and the people who journey beside us. Brené Brown says "Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen." Today we are showing up not just for ourselves, but for the saints of the church, for our loved ones who have died, showing up with our sadness and our gratitude to proclaim their lives were seen, their love made a difference, and their spirits live on. Amen.

