Homily – After Death
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Today we celebrate All Saints and All Souls Sunday and remember all those who have gone on before us.

In prior years on All Saints Sunday, I have preached about the act of dying and talked about some of the stages of death. Afterwards I heard from many of you about your own experiences about being with those who are dying. There were some common themes but also some whose experience of death was unlike others.

This year on All Saints Sunday I want to talk again about death, but instead of talking about the process of dying, I want to talk about what happens after death.

And I should first point out that ten people are going to have twelve different views about what happens after death, and that is OK.

We don't know what death is like, but I imagine that it is unlike anything we have ever experienced in this life, and I'm not sure that it is a place or has time.

I know what I hope about death, but I don't really know. So, to try to learn more, I went through some books on the afterlife. One of these was "The Next Place" by Warren Hanson. Here are some excerpts.

"The next place that I go will be as peaceful and familiar as a sleepy summer Sunday and a sweet, untroubled mind. And, yet... it won't be anything like any place I've ever been or seen... or even dreamed of in the place I leave behind.... The next place that I go won't really be a place at all.... And the me [all] that was impatient, or was angry or unkind, will simply be a memory. I will travel empty-handed. There is not a single thing I have collected in my life that I would want to bring except... the love of those who loved, and the warmth of those who cared. The happiness and memories and magic that we shared.... I'll be embraced by all the family and friends I've ever known. Although I might not see their faces, all our hearts will beat as one, and the circle of our spirits will shine brighter than the sun." Warren Hansen concludes by writing, "I will cherish all the friendship I was fortunate to find, all the love and all the laughter in the place I leave behind."

The Old and New Testaments portray death and the afterlife in a variety of ways, however, with only three exceptions, the consistent theme is that death is universal for all. Enoch, Moses and Elijah are the only exceptions, and curiously these are the three who appear with Jesus on the mountain during his transfiguration. While there

are four instances of people being brought back from death by Jesus or one of his Disciples, there is no reason to believe that those people didn't eventually die again So, death is pretty universal.

Over the millennia many ideas and traditions have developed about life after death. I think we are all aware of the Hindu tradition of reincarnation. There are also theories that our essence and being will be absorbed into the absolute, or other theories about bodily resurrection. Each week in our Nicene Creed we say "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

Throughout the millennia almost every human culture has had rituals to mark the death of a person and ceremonies to influence the transfer of the human being into a next state of being. There is some evidence that belief in the afterlife may even precede human beings as archeologists have found evidence of Neanderthal graves with both remains and artifacts.

Within ancient Middle East, cultures in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan all had elaborate beliefs about the afterlife, but curiously ancient Hebrews had very few descriptions of the afterlife. There are some ancient Hebrew references to Sheol or in Greek Hades. Sheol is a separated place in which the dead had no relationship with the living or even with God. Psalms 30, 88 and 115 insist that the dead cannot praise God. Also, the Old Testament writers give no indication that there is a continuation of the individual consciousness after death.

There is one odd story in the Book of First Samuel in which King Saul employs a medium to talk to the ghost of Samuel. King Saul gets into a lot of trouble for this for the detailed laws in the Book of Leviticus specifically prohibit the use of such mediums. Again, not much at all in the Old Testament is said about an afterlife.

Resurrection and renewal imagery and words in the Old Testament do not refer to the resurrection of individuals but the renewal of the Hebrew tribe as a community of people. While ancient Greek thought and philosophy had some references to an immortal soul, there is no reference in the Old Testament to this concept.

Let me repeat that, while ancient Greek thought and philosophy had some references to an immortal soul, there is no reference in the Old Testament to this concept.

However, at some point in its history the Hebrew people began believing in and counting on an afterlife. Greek ideas are thought to have influenced Jewish nobles so that by the time we arrive at the birth of Jesus, there has been a shift in beliefs about resurrection and souls.

New Testament writers have various ideas about an afterlife. Many of the sayings of Jesus allude to a kingdom of God that may be here in this life or someplace else. For the Apostle Paul, Christ makes the afterlife of all believers possible. And, Divine justice seems to be connected to the afterlife by the writer of the letters of 1st and 2nd Peter and by the writer of the book of Revelation.

Now, theologians pull out specific parts of the Bible and make some pretty big leaps to give us their theories about what happens after death, and as you can imagine Christian theologians come out in different places depending on what part of the Bible they pay attention. One example of a debate about death is whether people go directly to an afterlife that is somewhere else, or go into an afterlife that is already part of this universe, or have to wait for the second coming of Jesus before moving into an afterlife.

Another example of the on-going debate is about heaven and hell and who gets to go to each one. Justice issues come into play here, and we sometimes have debates about the differences between human justice and Divine justice. You have all heard these debates, and you may even have some closely held beliefs about the specificity or universality of salvation from Jesus.

In my own spiritual journey, I have very simple convictions about death. I belief that there is an afterlife, and like this life, the afterlife has something to do with being in relationship with God. Our God of unconditional love is with us in this life and in the next life, and that makes the afterlife beautiful. Also, I believe that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus impacts our journey to the afterlife, but other than that, I fall back into mystery. I just don't know the answers to many of the other questions about death.

I have things that I would like to be true about death. I would like to remain as an independent being. I would like to let go of much of the negative baggage that I have developed in this life. I would like to be in much closer relationship with God and with others, especially, my loved ones. I would like to know answers to things that have perplexed me. I would really, really like these things in death, but I don't know that this fits in with the way God has crafted the afterlife. Perhaps instead of getting answer to our cherished questions, we no longer care about the questions or the answers.

For some of you it may make you uncomfortable that your priest is standing in front of you without insisting on more convictions about death and an afterlife. I hope that the simplicity of my message does not dissuade you from your own beliefs. Like many of my messages I hope that I am making a space for diversity of thought and beliefs.

We have a big tent here at St. Barnabas that can include a variety of views about death.

My own spiritual journey does not bring me to a place that has detailed answers about death. My own spirituality is not negatively impacted with the mystery and lack of answers about death. My desire to be in deep relationship with God is not impacted by ideas of an afterlife, and justice issues in an afterlife do not shape my ethics and morality. My own spiritual journey has put me in a place where my actions are out of a love for God, other and myself and not out of fears of punishment in hell. I wonder what death will be like, and I appreciate that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has shaped my journey into death. By the grace of God our relationship with God will endure through death and into the afterlife. In Paul's letter to the Roman's he writes, *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Often when I meet with a family after the death of a loved one we talk about how the decedent's love endures. While there is a perceptible emptiness to a body, there is a deep and palpable sense that the decedent's love for her family was just as strong as ever, and their love for her was also living on.

Maybe this is another belief that I have about death. Death does not separate us from God's love and it does not separate us from the love of those that went before us. Our relationships endure through death. For me, spirituality is about being in relationship, and I believe that those relationships continue on after death. Maybe, in this earthly life, we continue to use the deceased person as a good role model or coach. Maybe we continue to be supported by the embracing love of the person who has died. Maybe we pick up the mantel of the person who has died and continue on with their ministry.

And sometimes our relationships can be even deeper after death than before. Whether it is with a parent, sibling or child, sometimes our relationships with those who have died can be healed in a way that seemed improbable before death.

Every year or so, I have preached about resentment, and I defined resentment as "a demand that something in the past would have been different." For safety or justice reasons we might hold into resentments, and after a person dies there may be an opportunity to re-examine the safety and justice issues and see if they have gone away. We might have an opportunity to unshackle ourselves from the painful resentment that was brought on by the deceased person. Our relationships can continue to grow and change even after a person dies.

On this All Saints and All Souls Sunday we remember those who have gone before us. We don't have all of the answers about death, but we can be comforted that our relationships continue on after death. The dead are still with us.

As I conclude today, here is a poem by Kate Farrell from her book "Time's River". The poem is called "Dan's Departure" and the poem will tell you who Dan is.

"So much do we love
Talking to people we love
About ideas we love
That thinking becomes a conversation
With people we love about ideas we love.

Being your mother
Became a conversation
Where your quiet ideas furthered
The attachment first fastened
In the far configurations
Of destiny.

I am honored that the universe
Loaned your childhood to me,
Adding such a bright star
To the constellation of conversations
That I am becoming,

For, however far apart we are,
Your considerate voice stays with me,
Enlightening my thinking.

I wish I could give you
A small package of whatever I know
That is worth knowing
To take with you wherever you go.

I wish you would call me from time to time
And tell the part of me that is you
Where your part of the conversation
Is going."