

Proper26A2023 All Saints

The Burden of Annihilation

By the Rev. Salying Wong

My neighborhood loves to decorate for Halloween. But the theme is generally all wrong to me—with clowns wielding chainsaws, vampires dripping with blood, bodies hung upside down by cobwebs. This is the general imagination. It imagines death as scary, as violent, as something to fear. I prefer the Dia de los Muertos decorations, with skeletons in beautiful dress, often posed in an act of enjoying life. The memento mori is present, but it does not tell you to dread death, nor be afraid of it. In fact, inviting the dead to come among us is an occasion for joy.

At this time of year, the church has a trifecta of commemorations: Oct. 31, Nov. 1, and Nov. 2; All Hallow's Eve, All Hallow's/All Saints, All Souls/All the Departed. It is a time to remember the great cloud of witnesses, those in ages past who followed Jesus; it is a time to also remember the departed, those who were close to us, whose absence *and* presence we still feel; it is, finally, a time for us to note how short our life really is; and in the time that is left to us, we are asked, "How will I live the rest of my life?"

Today, I want to contemplate with you what it means to live without fear, which is to live trusting in love; I also want to contemplate with you what death means and what ends and what does not end.

Today, in the gospel reading we hear Jesus criticizing those who teach things that become a burden to the people. I ask you now to reflect on what teaching you've received that is/was a burden to you. It doesn't have to be given to you by a particular person, but by culture. What does that burden feel like? I think the worst lessons, the most burdensome lessons are lessons that try to compel you to believe in annihilation—like, God won't love you if you're gay, like you don't matter as much as a woman, as a minority. Or maybe it is less social, like someone wanted to shut you down

because they had power over you; they criticized you or shamed you. Today, I'm thinking of the burden of poor teachings on death and dying. It could be the church, like when my pastor from my Baptist church told me my parents were going to hell because they didn't believe in Jesus. Or, it could actually be the opposite of religion, like the conclusion of atheism, which says that this is all that there is; there's nothing else. Dead, poof, you're gone; everyone who loved you is gone.

I believe lessons in annihilation are among the most burdensome. If we have experienced annihilation—that is, if we were hurt in our vulnerability, surrender is the hardest thing. Death is the final surrender to what is unknown.

But we need not worry. In God, death is not annihilation, but consummation.

Let me tell you a vision I had once. I was making a visit to a St. Thomas parishioner at Cedar Crest. To get to her room, I passed by a corridor of men and women sitting in wheelchairs, some of whom were drooling, some of whom needed their diapers changed, some were moaning in pain. It was almost more than I could bear. Where's the dignity in this suffering, in these latter days?

When I got to the room I was looking for, I was so despondent, I didn't want to go in. I leaned against the wall and prayed. God, I said, where are you?

Suddenly, everything dissolved: the all, the rooms, the floor, the ceiling—and all around me was a universe of light. I gasped and it was gone. Then I heard God say, "You think you see..."

Now we see through a glass darkly, then we shall see face to face.

This doesn't mean that we don't grieve. On All Hallows' Eve, I had a dream of my mother dying. And, when I woke and realized it was real, the grief pierced my heart. I didn't think I could bear it; I didn't want to bear it. I

asked God to take me to my mother; I didn't want to be so far from her. I laid in bed for another half hour before I made peace with the reality that I had another day to live.

We must grieve to be fully human. But love is what makes us eternal. One day, we will shrug off our humanity—and as the Apostle Paul said, we will not be found naked; rather, we shall be robed glory. (2 Cor.) The dead already are robed in glory. When the mystic Matilda of Madeburg was praying, God told her not to be afraid of death. Because at that time, God would draw her close, like a needle to a magnet.

All Hallow's Eve, All Saints, and All Souls tells us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, who witness to the enduring and eternal nature of love. When we love well here and now, we align our will with eternity. Those who have gone before are praying for us and guiding us in the way of love. So, when that day comes, we shall sing with them and the angels, "Glory, glory, glory!"