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Theme: "Connections"

Homily: "To Love Everything"

October 11, 2015

Call to Worship

Good Columbus Weekend Sunday morning to you all, I am so glad we have all come out on this sunny day to be together in this bright room, surrounded by these big windows. If at any point in the service you would rather look at the window then up to the pulpit, I enthusiastically invite you to do so. It is one of the most colorful times of the year, and we should all have the right to be in it, or look at it whenever we want.

Instead of celebrating Christopher Columbus today, I hope it is alright with you, if we instead celebrate the 89th birthday of Vietnamese Zen Monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Teacher, author, poet, peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh is one of the foremost and well loved Buddhist teachers of our time. Let's open our service this morning with a reading from his book "Touching Peace."

"Life is found only in the present moment. I think we should have a holiday to celebrate this fact. We have holidays for so many important occasions – Christmas, New Year's, Mother's Day, Father's Day, even Earth Day – why not celebrate a day when we can live happily in the present moment all day long? I would like to declare today "Today's Day," a day dedicated to touching the Earth, touching the sky, touching the trees, and touching the peace that is available in the present moment."

Reading

"In Blackwater Woods", By Mary Oliver (*American Primitive*, 1983)

Look, the trees are turning their own bodies into pillars of light, are giving off the rich fragrance of cinnamon and fulfillment, the long tapers of cattails are bursting and floating away over the blue shoulders of the ponds, and every pond, no matter what its name is, is nameless now.

Every year everything I have ever learned in my lifetime leads back to this: the fires and the black river of loss whose other side is salvation, whose meaning none of us will ever know.

To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

Sermon

Isn't it so strange how we are going to die? How every single last one of us here, and every single one of them out there, and all of those living on the other side of the world and everywhere in between is going to die? It's the strangest thing. And we'll die at all different ages, from all different causes, in all different places. And more likely than not, our death isn't going to be how we expected, and the death of those we know won't be the way we expected either.

Aren't you glad you decided to come to church today, on your sunny long weekend Sunday morning? If you want to just take off, get a latte and a Sunday times, totally, by all means. It doesn't mean though, that at some point, you're not still going to die.

I would apologize for the grim subject matter, but I don't feel like I should. I don't believe that death is a morbid or grim subject. It's a fact. It's so odd that the major elements of life that keep and sustain the life cycle, sex and death, are the most uncomfortable subjects for people to talk about openly with one another. Or even to come to terms with personally and explore in their own heart, mind, and body. Teaching the Our Whole Lives sexuality curriculum for the second time this year to our 8th graders, it's occurred to me that death may actually be a harder subject, a more taboo subject for people to discuss than sex. Why? Fear? The unknown? It's too painful? I don't know.

I've felt discomfort have with death take over the room again and again since returning from my job as a hospital chaplain this summer. People ask me how it was and what I learned. I have been trying to come up with an elevator speech on the experience, but again and again I fail at responding with a good quick answer. The best I've come up with is, "It was hard, but it was all good, I saw a lot of death, I learned that we're going to die." This is usually met with either a burst of laughter, or suddenly weepy eyes. It is also, almost always, a conversation ender (which maybe is my secret goal...) Death is so hard. I really don't think that most of us know what to do with it. It's like the project we spend more time procrastinating on than any other. The thing on our life to-do list that we will get around to eventually, maybe.

Before doing chaplaincy this summer, I didn't really get death. I mean, I got that it was going to happen, and I wished death fairly frequently on Massachusetts drivers, but despite my spiritual training, and my Buddhist father telling me for as long as I can remember, "Hillary, you know, death is certain, time of death, uncertain, I don't think I really understood just how impermanent everything actually is.

Almost always called to be with the dying and families of the dying, Chaplains probably see more deaths over the course of the day than anyone else in the hospital. My brief time on the units was no exception to the rule. I saw a lot of people die, people as young as newborn babies and older than a hundred years. And although death did not always seem right, rarely was it any thing spectacular. I

mean, it was amazing. The deaths I witnessed belong in the collection of the most sacred, wrenching, and profound moments of my life. More often than not though, the death I saw was pretty anti-climatic. Those bursting, *dying*, yellow, red, and orange leaves outside are much more dramatic than many of the deaths I saw on the units.

There was this one patient in particular that stands out in my memory as a good example of the beauty and banality of death. She was an elderly woman, who had been in the hospital suffering from a collection of ailments for about a week. Family had been notified that she may soon pass away, and so many of them had come to be with her in her final days. When it was clear that she would not recover, the decision was made to remove her from life support. Before they did though, she had two requests, she wanted to have a glass of red wine and she wanted to listen to Tim Mcgraw while she drank it – We were in Virginia, there were a lot of requests from patients to listen to country music. When she made her request the RN looked a little dumbfounded but said she would ask the MD if the wine would be possible. About an hour later the doctor came in with a wine glass and a bottle of wine. He apparently had gone out bought it for her personally. He poured her a glass and she took a sip and “practically keeled over” or so I was told, so they poured half of it out and mixed it with water. She raised her glass to toast to her family and the doctor and they turned up Tim Mcgraw. “She looked like she had gone to heaven early,” her daughter told me, “Then she just konked on out.” I was paged in to the room not long after the happy hour, as support was removed. I saw the half drunk wine glass on her bedside tray and the family relayed to me the events of the evening.

“Mom wanted us all to stand around her and pray as they took the cords out of her, will you lead us in prayer. Come on everybody, get up, hold hands.” We prayed together as the nurses worked, the patient’s daughter spoke loudly in to her mother’s ear, “Mom the chaplain is here, and we’re all praying for you. We want you to fly home, we want you to get your angel wings, we’re all here.” The woman nodded groggily, half opened her eyes, and closed them again. We finished our prayer and the family was quiet. The nurse broke the silence, “So I’ve removed the ventilator and she is breathing on her own now, often what happens from here is the breath starts to slow, she may hiccup or twitch at times as things begin to slow down, but don’t be alarmed, it’s normal and her body is doing the right thing.” The family nodded, “I want to give your time now, so I will take my leave, ring if you need anything, the chaplain will stay with you.” (This was fairly common in my experience as a chaplain, nurses and doctors would page me to rooms, where I wasn’t entirely sure what I should be doing or was capable of, and they would announce my presence to the family and tell them I was staying with them, then they would leave and close the door.)

“Thank you, Chaplain,” the daughter said. I nodded and folded my hands. “Ok, so she’s going guys, the tubes are all out. She’s going, gather round her, ok, come here be close to her, it’s what she wanted.” The woman’s breath quickly slowed. The mountains her pulse formed on the heart monitor, quickly fell and distance grew

between them. "Mom we're all here, we're all here with you." She did not respond.

"Is she gone?" One of the family members spoke up.

"No look at her heart monitor, its still going a little."

"She's not breathing though."

It was true, I couldn't recall when I last saw her breathe. Everyone got quiet. The woman was still. Her face relaxed. We leaned in.

"She breathin? She's gone." The family member spoke again.

"Yeah, maybe so," The daughter replied. "Ok mom, we love-"

The woman took a sudden deep breath of air. Everyone jumped.

"Nope, nope," said the daughter, "She's still with us."

For the next two and a half hours, it went like this.

She would breathe a sudden deep breath, and then her face would relax, the room would go quiet, everyone would think this was it, and then a few minutes later she would take another deep breath. People began to get antsy, told stories, ate granola bars, went to the bathroom, stepped outside to make phone calls. There was a teenager in the room who furiously texted through most of the evening, leaning towards her mother at one point to whisper, "I'm so bored." Her mother shushed her, and then her husband leaned in and whispered that he was bored too.

At one point in the night, after a raucous retelling of a collection of stories from the woman's life, many of them involving her dog, Buckshot, the RN came in to see how everyone was doing.

"Oh we're having a good time with her in her last moments," the daughter explained.

"Yeah! From outside it sounded like she was having a really joyful end to her life," the RN replied.

"Yeah, she is, how is she doing?" the daughter asked.

"Well, she passed, so I hope she's doing okay where she is now."

"She wha, she did? When?"

"A few minutes ago, that's why I came in, I saw on the desk monitor that she had passed."

"Huh," the daughter was dumbfounded, "I don't know if I even saw her go."

"Yeah, its often pretty quiet," the nurse said, "I'll give you all some more time."

"Everybody, chaplain, will you pray with us again? Everybody get up. Oh mom we love you, we love you. She's gone, I can see that, she's gone."

We prayed, family members wept, and lingered by her bed. I left the room and gave them time too. Soon though they all trickled out of the room, and headed home together.

Most of the deaths I saw this summer went this way, quietly, slowly, both surprising and unsurprising at once. Death happens. And, well, I don't know what happens when death happens, but if it's any comfort to you, from the looks of most of the deaths I saw, it seemed to me to be a fairly simple, peaceful, painless event. Usually much less screaming and blood than a birth, I can tell you that much.

The pain in death, more often than not, was bred from love. And usually the ones experiencing it were not the dying, but the ones who loved them.

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

In this life things so often go, without us letting go. Everyday they go, some of them we watch, some we ignore, some we resist, and a few we just let, go. The easiest letting go is the passive kind: the “oh well”, “c’est le vie”, “crap happens, we’ll survive,” kind. The best is active letting go: making change, coming to terms with change, resolving, awakening, sobering up. Active letting go is the work of the heart, mind, body; it is the work of life. Letting go is hardest when it’s forced: when we really don’t want it, when it’s premature, when we have no control over it, or any idea how we will go on once it’s happened.

Death is the ultimate forced letting go. I don’t really know what I think about the fact that I am going to die. “C’est la vie?” but that my parents are going to die, and my partner, my friends, my teachers, my animals, everything I love, destroys me. I cried so much this summer as I coped with the fact of dying. (Just ask alexis, it was a fun summer.) Why is it so easy to love everything in this life and so hard to let it go? Who thought that was a reasonable mindset to put in humans? How can we live life the best we can, loving everything we can, and not end up sad, wishing we hadn’t, wishing that our hearts would have been two sizes smaller our whole lives?

By learning to let go.

We can plan for death in various ways: preparing documents that list health care proxies and living will details (we have such forms here at Follen if you would like one please contact me), we can share with others our fears and worries about death instead of repressing them, we can provide details of how we would like to be remembered, and our thoughts on how we would like to go. But, more than anything we need to train ourselves how to let go. When the time comes to let go, we probably won’t feel like it. But things, everything, will still go and we will have to let it.

How do we love everything and then let it go? I don’t know. By being present to it now, holding it close, realizing there is no grand plan we can have any control over, but there is just this. Coming back to the present moment I promise you will feel more alive and in love than when your mind wanders to plans and worries. Just this. Then let it go. Just this. Today’s Day. Here now, soon gone. But right now just this. So much to love, to feel, to hold, live with, in just this. Death is certain, Time of death uncertain, but until then, remember every now and then to live in just this. Then when it’s time to let go, you will know, that while you had your love, you held close to your bones, and you felt it truly. You will know you truly lived. Just this. Today’s day.