



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

LET HOPE AND SORROW NOW UNITE

All Saints' Day

November 1, 2015

Judeo-Christian  
Psalm 104

*Lord, you have made so many things. How wisely you made them all. The earth is filled with your creatures. There is the ocean, large and wide, where countless creatures live, large and small alike. The ships sail on it and in it plays Leviathan, that sea monster which you made.*

*All of them depend on you to give them food when they need it. You give it to them and they are satisfied. When you turn away, they are afraid; when you take away their breath, they die, and go back to the dust from which they came. But when you give them breath, they are created: you give new life to the earth. May the glory of God last forever.*

Hindu  
Bhagavad-Gita 2.19-25

*You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. You are part of that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn and unchanging. As a person abandons worn-out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the Self, who lives within.*

We reflect on this All Saints' Day on the lives of those we have lost this past year, and realize as we look back at the list over the last ten years that there has been an enormous group of talented people that has sustained this church in past decades. These past few weeks have been particularly difficult, as we have celebrated lives and grieved deaths, making a service such as this one today especially poignant.

Professor Brent Plate says that in teaching about life and death we must emphasize the importance of religious practices, rather than beliefs. It is in ritual, such as this service today, that we are able to embody meaning in that which makes no sense to us, combining theory and practice, for rituals are practical tools for recognizing some sense of grounding in the midst of the tragedy that often surrounds death.

When there is a tragedy of a national or even local level, makeshift shrines and memorials laden with flowers and notes pop up all over as meaningful rituals for coping. Closer to home, when we lose a member of our family or close circle of friends, we have rituals in place that pull us in to the close center of those who care, helping us put one foot in front of the other when we can't see where we're going. Friends bring food; visitations and wakes provide opportunities for shared hugs and tears; funerals and memorial services celebrate life with stories and undergird death with the promises of God's presence. Rituals such as these are vital to our bereavement.

What is not helpful is inane platitudes and empty words. The last thing a survivor wants to hear, especially in a tragic death, is that God needed another angel in heaven. There's no theological basis for such trite and angering attempts at consolation and in reality there's nothing that can be said that ameliorates pain and loss, so best to just say nothing but offer hugs and tears.

The truth is that no one knows what happens when we die. Though everyone has considered some sort of educated guess or belief system about the afterlife, the truth is that no one knows. Religionists try to convince us they know but the talk of heaven or the notion that God wants a loved one more than we do seems blasphemous and is often destructive in the crisis of death. Those who speak confidently about it aren't dead and don't know any more about it than you or I do. And as Martin Forward has said:

The wise in every generation have been careful not to describe overmuch the joys of heaven or the pains of hell. Death is this life's last great adventure into uncharted territories; it is the supreme mystery, and so demands and deserves our silence rather than inane chattering. Better to say too little than too much and to say it in faith and hope and love, not in knowledge.

The age-old question of "why?" has been on our lips and in our thoughts these past weeks. It is the natural reaction of the human mind when someone young is taken from us or someone whose gifts make life enjoyable for man. "Why was **he** taken from us prematurely when he had such a promising future?" "Why was she taken from us when she had just started to put her life back together with great prospects?" "Why was my child taken when my grandfather has been praying for years to die?"

It's natural to ask "why?" because such things make no sense. And to try to make sense of it only frustrates us and thwarts what good we can do as people of faith to support those who have survived. The "whys" are always on our mind, but to focus on the "whys" sends our energies in the wrong direction. "Whys?" need answers, and all too often we get in trouble making up answers to satisfy the questions, and it creates more problems than it helps. Any attempt of which puts God or the deceased or the society in a bad light, and negative energy consumes us.

People of faith are just that, people who live by faith when there are no answers. We know there are no guarantees in life, and when the unexpected tragedy interrupts our expectations, faith steps in to empower us to be a community precisely because there are no answers. Deep in our bones is the need to be together during a crisis precisely because we have no answers and don't know how to wrap our minds around a tragedy. That's where ritual and the community of faith come together in the presence of God to support us.

The hymn which we just sang is instructive, I think, in our ritual-making in the midst of death.

Let hope and sorrow now unite to consecrate life's ending.

And praise good friends now gone from sight though grief and loss are rending.

With faith or doubt or open mind we whisper life's great question.

The ebb and flow of space and time surpass our small perception.

Yet knowledge grows with joyful gains and finds out wonders far more strange

Than hopes of resurrection.

Let hope and sorrow now unite. It is a helpful ritual that replaces our exhaustion from trying to figure it out. It's a comforting thought when we are thrown into the very bottom of hell. To be sure, it takes away no pain; it reverses no tragedy; it brings no breath back into lifeless bodies. But the hope of dying into the presence of God, like falling backward into the water and floating, where new breath is received and new clothes are acquired, consecrates our sorrow. And the rituals of friends attending to our daily support, as we commune with the saints above, undergird our hope amid our sorrow. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

God of the past, the present, and the future, this week we have seen in the eyes of the future generations the twinkle of Halloween delight, a cabaret of sorts, with costumes that spur the imagination, Here young and old alike have enjoyed being someone else, if only for a night, and savored sweet treats to chase away the sour moments of life, if only temporarily.

Amid the delight of the season, we are mindful today of holy ghosts, as it were, honored on this All Saints' Day, remembering those who have gone before us, those we call saints, those who by their example have modeled the best we can hope to be.

Some saints we honor are ancient, now almost mythic and distant, but some of those we have known—mothers, fathers, daughters and sons, brothers, sisters, and grandparents—who today are not with us in flesh and blood but who are with us in powerful new ways through spirit and memory and love.

We thank you for the mark they have left on our souls, for the legacies of integrity and love they have bequeathed us to enjoy, and also for the peace they now enjoy in the mysterious realm of Your Holy Presence.

In tribute, may we honor the best they had to offer the world, forgiving their shortcomings and weaknesses, and honoring their memory by the way we live our lives so we might be honorable saints for those who come after us. We especially remember those who have given their lives to sustain this church, knowing that without them we could not be here. And in our remembering, bestow their generosity on us that we might provide a place for those who will follow us here.

To that end, we come to dedicate ourselves again, that as we take into ourselves this bread and wine we give ourselves to the betterment of humanity as did those who have gone before, especially learning from Jesus, who empowers this banquet. May we eat and drink with the certainty that life and death are in your hands, and that by these gifts we enter into a new life in conjunction with the saints. In the name of the Mystery, Amen.