

## **The Liturgy for July 19, 2020**

**The Question to be addressed:** *Now, about the Afterlife.....Part 2: !*

### **~Thought for Meditation:**

*She must be loving it up in heaven, where I figure everybody must just let loose. That's got to be at least one of the benefits of heaven—never having to act normal again. Summer in Missing May by Cynthia Rylant*

**~GATHERING:** Today we are continuing with the worship theme of the After life: And in how we might talk about, or understand it, especially if children question us. And, again I want to thank two people in particular for this question, one is a not-quite-five year old and the other is an adult over 50, let's say. Yes, both had the same question. And I think that makes it profoundly important, because it tells me that it is a question we ponder throughout our life.

So thank you Tenley MacBean and Floyd Ross.

### **~LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE:**

### **~CALL TO WORSHIP**

Grace, peace and mercy be yours. Let's worship together.

### **~OPENING PRAYER ENDING WITH THE LORD'S PRAYER**

We trust that you, O God, are our eternal dwelling place, and that underneath us are the everlasting arms. May that be enough for us in this moment, in this time, as we enter into worship. And hear us now, as together we pray the words of Jesus, saying:

**Our Father who art in heaven,**

**Hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,**

**Thy will be done,**

**On earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread,**

**And forgive us our trespasses,**

**As we forgive those who trespass against us.**

**And lead us not into temptation,**

**But deliver us from evil,**

**For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,**

**For ever and ever. Amen.**

### **~Scripture: John 14: selected verses**

**In my Father's house there are many dwelling places/mansions. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.**

**Peace I leave with you.**

**My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.**

**So do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.**

***~Reflection: How Children Can Help Us To Make Our Way Through The Big Questions***

How shall we talk of this?

How shall we speak of death and ending and heaven...to a child?

Well, how indeed do we speak of it to adults?

It is the ultimate mystery of which we have no words...but to try and express our faith, our hope, our uncertainty is what we do...and it is a good and natural and human thing to do.

Has always been.

And because we cannot know with utter proof and certainty, we lean into phrasing, perhaps fumbling our way, as we try to explain death and where the person is now: *well, it's like...*

Or, *it is as if ...*

Like what? As if what??

*Well, remember when we are coming home late at night after a big family time at Aunt Belle's? And you fall asleep in the car? You don't know that I picked you up and carried you in loving arms up to bed. But in the morning there you were safe and sound and ...home.*

It's a warm image, no? But we also become conscious of the metaphor we have used, that of death as akin to going to sleep. How does that sit?

Well, theologically, this kind of 'death as sleep' imagery has deep roots.

Especially in the Eastern Orthodox branch of the Christian tradition where death is typically referred to as "falling asleep in the Lord." An Orthodox funeral will include the timeless prayer: "For you, O Lord, are the Resurrection, the Life, and the Repose of your servant who has fallen asleep. Amen."

Scripture speaks of death as a "sleep" too:

~OT stories and the Psalms will speak of someone as "Sleeping with the ancestors." And in the NT also, especially works accredited to Paul, speak of the dead as those who are asleep. And of course this ties in with the understanding of a coming "awakening or resurrection" at some future point, as we spoke of last week.

Did you ever sit in a room with people, discussing the prayer ditties you learned as a child? sometimes said at breakneck speed or in an unthinking sort of monotonous rote .... Such as:

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” [Nice so far, wha?] Until we hit the follow up line: “If I should die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Wait, what??? If I should die before I wake????!

Night, night now. Sleep well, kid!

So, how shall we speak of this thing?

Perhaps the imagery of becoming one with creation strikes a chord...or being received in God’s great and loving light. Ecclesiastes gives that balanced line of there being a time for everything...both to be born and to die. (I don’t like that taken to the image of a pre-determined time, with God as the bearer of “the book” that has it already mapped out those dates and times. Just saying.)

There are, of course lots of books written on the subject, some for people of faith others looking at it from a humanist view or nature perspective.

Whatever you choose, I think it helps to run over the ideas and see how they feel on your tongue and in your heart and mind and soul, before you start to offer them up to a child. But know too, that agonizing over a detailed account, of something that is quite simply, still mystery to us all, is probably more stressful than helpful.

So that is how I found myself turning to a traditional piece of funeral scripture. I find it meaningful that Jesus, in the passage from John, speaks in a simple style, with imagery of comfort and yes, familiarity:

In my father’s house there are many mansions/dwelling places/rooms - sense of warmth and belonging that the word “house/home” can bring. An understandable word, in a time of sadness and confusion and upheaval. And it is a place that Jesus will be preparing for us...getting it ready...just as we do when our favourite people come to stay with us. A sense that there will be the familiar, the comforts, the special things they have always loved.

You can even ask a child “Now what do you think Grammie would need for heaven to feel just right?” They will have their ideas....Some things that you would think of, but also they will add their own insights of Grammie’s essential needs based on their own particular relationship. Uncle Gabe’s battered old hat that he seemed to live in: “He always wore it when he swunged me on the swing.” Aunt Aggie’s sweater that was “perfect for snuggling with her.” Perhaps this could even be honoured by placing such a deep symbol in the sanctuary on the day of the service/visitation. Once, a family was deciding on a mug to place on a table near Grandma’s picture, as they prepared for the wake. And it was a grandchild who went to the

cupboard and pointed, saying: *This one*. The one the elderly woman had always used when she shared tea with the little girl. She wondered aloud who Grandma would have tea parties with now- Jesus? Her other relatives who were now gone? The child helped place the mug on the table. She did it, just so, with such love and reverence.

Children are attentive to loneliness...their own and others. Can we notice too, that Jesus gives a sense of assurance to his friends that they don't have to manage the journey alone: "I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also." A holy companion. And one with endless sense of welcome: *Look, there is room for ALL – all those dwelling places: room for everyone*. A sense of the great cloud of witnesses gathered at the huge banquet/picnic/potluck/tea party appeals to many.

The other thing that I think is important as you talk about it, is to also see if and how the children would like to be present at the service. Families all have their own dynamic, their sense of what is best for their children. Age and temperament, the level of grief and each one's 'state of heart' must be considered. You will do just fine whatever you decide. All I will say is this: do consider letting the children participate as they are able and care to....

They bring their own particular ways and understandings to the time, they help to honour their loved one and in so doing they help to honour their own good selves as they find their place in the world that has also changed for them.

I remember sitting with a family as we prepared for a funeral of a woman who had been spouse/mother and grandmother. Two grandchildren, about 8 and 10 years old, had wanted to "do something" during the service. After some thought and conversation we decided that they would light the Christ candle together. After I had given a brief explanation of what it meant to us in the church, they in turn had shared with me that "Nana always let us light the candles on the table when we had a big family supper." Having never attended church, the light was not, for them, a symbol of the presence of the spirit of Christ. But it recalled for them their grandmother's lessons in responsibility, the love of family, and a meal celebrated together. Rather than smacking of sentimentality the act had a certain strength to it. The girls took seriously their duty and handled it with much care and dignity. I was glad to welcome their gifts and wholehearted participation.

Let children come near to the mystery: I say "let" but you aren't "letting" them...children are almost always closer to mystery than we are: they live closer to the ground, tighter to the essence of what is / what might be. So, for me, I say always, let them come – in safe ways to be sure – but let them come to the fire. Let them be present in the face of unknowing and longing

to make meaning. And ritual, such as at the time of death, is potent for making meaning.

For ritual, requires the participation of actors within the drama: individuals who recognize *in some way* that a purposeful act of symbols, meaning, etc., is taking place, even if they hold differing views on what the symbols and actions are signifying. Is it a Christ Candle, or is it Fire? Is it a sign of the presence of Christ, or a symbol of light and warmth in the cold starkness of death and loss? Surely ritual, done with some integrity and hope, does not require those gathered to believe precisely the same thing in order to ‘do its work.’ The ability to live with the ambiguity of this, especially during a funeral, seems to me an essential aspect of our engagement with one another within the faith community or those from the wider community.

Rituals at this time can be very **bodily**, which is so good for children - active experiences that allow us to make meaning of, and come to terms with, life events, with far more depth than a literal explanation.

~ So start by asking for their help in a ritual act: like a drawing that can be included at the funeral; or a flower that they stop and quickly gather up by the graveside: A dandelion or wee violet for Grandad.

~Inuksuks: Friends who are Innu from Labrador held a memorial service for their daughter. We gathered at their cottage and there on the lakeshore young and old alike gathered up rocks and created innukshuks...cairns, memorial markers of a life: The children took the lead, helping cautious adults along with encouragement and enthusiasm. It was sad and playful and blessing for everyone present.

~Brodie and Lauren: We lost a young woman recently – whose family is part of our extended community. The question emerged of how to help the youngest of the children to understand. How indeed? Brodie who is 5 and Lauren who is 3 created art that hung on the picture boards at the funeral home. They were proud to see their work for Mummy attended to in this way. But it was at the service itself that these 2 children stepped in, and inserted themselves in ritual. It was at the end of the service and I was stepping down from the chancel to stand on the floor by the urn. As I did this, Brodie, in the front row, asked: “What are you doing now?” That seldom happens in the midst of a funeral. Maybe it should more often. I said “Well, Brod, I’m going to say some words to God, as we send Mummy into his loving care. And our goodbyes. Is that alright?” And he said “Yes, OK.” And then he got up and he came and he stood by me. Facing all those attending. In his newly purchased suit and wee tie. Straight as a ramrod he stood there – and he is normally a whirling dervish - commanding a strength that I was able to borrow from as I said:

“Into your loving hands, O God, we commend this woman Lori. Acknowledge we pray you, a sheep of your fold, a lamb of your flock, a daughter of your own redeeming. Receive her into the everlasting arms of peace and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen.”

And then Brodie: Amen. Bye.

And Lauren did the ritual of a three year old: she turned and looked upwards, shielding her eyes – from what..a great light? – and waved and waved. Her farewell.

I am glad I had both: I am so glad I had the ancient words to lean on that day, to uphold me in the weighty pain of a child’s loss and questions. And I am so glad I had the children and their natural ways, their instinctive, intuitive, simple and wondrous ways: moving their bodies and stilling their bodies: holding us all together in the holy.

So: Listen and I will tell you a mystery: I think we speak to children of it in much the same way that we speak as adults...that is by listening to their ideas; to their fear and pain and worry and questions; to their imaginative phrases and quirky theology....

What will this be like? I do not know.

But I trust in the one who has held me well all my life...the one I have loved and challenged and took lightly and too seriously. The One who is both beyond me and with me; the One who is still seeking me out....will be there at my end and new beginning. And for me, that is enough.

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### **~A Time of Prayer**

O God of Grace and Love, life and death, joy and sorrow, you gather us together as beloved community.

Thank You for the gift of life, for the lives of those who have gone before us, for those lives around us here and now, that so enrich our own.

We thank You especially today for having created

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whom we have known as \_\_\_\_\_

We thank You for the gift of their life, for all in them that was good and loyal.

We are grateful for their strength, wisdom, for every act of love and devotion to family and friends.

Thanks for \_\_\_\_\_ too God – the way they could make us

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Grant \_\_\_\_\_ the courage to face this loss, the grace to lean on others.

Help us as a community O God, to remember the role we all play, in supporting and strengthening someone who has lost a family member or a friend. Remind us to tell stories and share our memories, and our love, which is to say, help us to be human together! Amen.