All Saints' Day

Brian Mattson - 11/1/2026

All Saints Day is always on November 1st in the Church's liturgical calendar. As United Methodists, we normally observe the day on the first Sunday of November, but this year they both line up on the same date. We gather to remember those in our lives who have passed on from this world, and at the same time we celebrate the impact and importance they've had on us. It can feel a little odd to celebrate death, but dying is part of what Father Richard Rohr calls *The Pattern*.

> **Christianity—as well as Buddhism, other religions, and natural systems—suggests that *the* pattern of transformation, *the* pattern that connects, *the* life that Reality offers us is not death avoided, but *death transformed*. In other words, the only trustworthy pattern of spiritual transformation is death *and* resurrection.**

It would seem, in both physical and spiritual ways, that death is necessary for life. My faith doesn't rely on science, but humanity's scientific knowledge and discoveries shape and form my understanding of life. I believe God is the author and creator of the universe and in some metaphysical sense created an order or pattern to our physical reality that generally adheres to the laws of physics. There are processes that have been at work for longer than we can comprehend with our human brains.

In his book, *Curveball*, Pete Enns talks about the cosmological process that yielded life on Earth. The universe was created and cooled, and then gravity

gathered gases and birthed stars, which have been growing and dying ever since. These stars burn for uncountable years then, in a dying breath, blast their atomic elements out into the universe. Earth, and everything in it, happens to be the product of stardust. This is a process I believe to be divinely directed by God for the purpose of revealing God's plans for humanity. Not only God's plans, but also the pattern of all things. Enns writes:

> **To be alive on Earth means something else had to die, and that which died was transformed into something new to make us us—and not just us, but every living thing. The New Testament also sees the death of Christ as necessary for renewed life. As it is written, *"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."***
>
> **- Pete Enns**

That verse that Pete Enns references comes from John 12. I used that verse a few weeks ago to talk about the power of generosity, and how when we let things go, give them away—let them die—more and greater things are created. In essence, life comes from death.

We know this process is baked into Creation. It's easy to see every spring when new shoots emerge from the dirt. Gardeners are keenly aware of this beautiful process. They carefully prepare soil and seeds to give new life the best chance at succeeding. Yet even the laziest gardener or non-gardener is a witness to this transformation.

Years ago in my laziness, I left a pumpkin on the front porch a little too long. You know the scenario of which I speak. It was a smaller one that we didn't decorate for Halloween, so I thought I would leave it out as a fall decoration until Thanksgiving. It started to sag at the top and wrinkles appeared in different places. I finally decided to get rid of the pumpkin because I saw

some sort of liquid forming a pool underneath it. Usually with my left-out-too-long pumpkins, I try my best to pick them up and take them to the compost facility, or in dire circumstances get the gunk into a trashbag. Well, this particular year the pumpkin completely disintegrated as I went to pick it up. A mess of pulp and seeds spilled over the porch into the mulch bed next to our porch. It was then that I realized there was no cleaning this up, so I just went with the easiest, laziest solution. I tossed the stem over the side and scraped the sticky and stinky remnants into the mulch, wiped my hands on my jeans, and completely forgot about that problem.

The next spring as I was on my first mow of the season, I noticed a green sprout poking up through the mulch. As the weeks went by, we figured out that it must've been one of the seeds from that pumpkin the previous fall. Then, over the next few months, a long vine with multiple little pumpkins grew and grew. It crawled out into my yard and I had to move it to and fro to protect it from the path of the lawnmower. We just let it do its thing and we gathered a few small white pumpkins from the vine, but we never really cared for it or encouraged a bumper crop. Still, death and life were woven into its genetic blueprint.

For that shriveling, forgotten little decoration pumpkin, death was not avoided. Death transformed it into something new again. Jesus was very keen on this idea. You remember all that death and resurrection talk? During his ministry, the closer he got to Jerusalem, the more he talked about it. Some of his most famous words of comfort appear in a discussion about someone else's death and eventual resurrection. That of his dear friend Lazarus.

In John 11, Jesus meets Martha on the road and she tells him of Lazarus's death. Then Jesus speaks words we often say at funeral services as a way to comfort and console her loss.

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

- John 11:23-26

Martha understands these words of Jesus to be future focused. She believes that at the end of her life, she will be reunited with her brother through the promise of resurrection. And while this truth is one part of Jesus' words, the promise of resurrection is not only meant for the afterlife. The Message translation captures that sentiment well.

Jesus said, "Your brother will be raised up." Martha replied, "I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time."

"You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?"

- John 11:23-26 MSG

My study Bible talks about the importance of this "I Am" statement from Jesus as not only future-focused, but a current reality.

In the "I Am" saying, Jesus announces that the promise of resurrection is not lodged in some distant event, but is available now in him. Jesus shares completely in God's ability to give life. As the resurrection and the life, Jesus defeats the power of death in the future and in the present.

- The New Interpreter's Study Bible

This is part of the pattern I talked about at the beginning of the sermon. Through death comes life. Death, in a spiritual sense, is not an end, but part of the transformation we experience. And through this spiritual death, life multiplies.

The chapter after the Lazarus story, Jesus enters Jerusalem for his final week, another story that ends with a resurrection. But even Jesus' death is part of God's divine plan for humanity. Salvation, it would seem, is secured through death and sacrifice—Jesus' death and our own. Here are his words from John 12:

> **Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.**
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> **- John 12:24-25**

This eternal life Jesus speaks of is the essence of salvation. It's the idea of the truest, most God-centered life one can lead. It's a very present reality, not something we inherit once we actually cease to be alive in a physical sense here on Earth. Today on All Saints Day though, we are remembering those who *have* passed on from our physical realm. People who have meant so much to us that we celebrate their lives and the lasting effect they've had on us.

For some here today, the loss and grief is incredibly close. Whether that's due to recency or the loss of someone was so impactful to you, the hurt seems just as fresh everyday. The memories we cherish and the grief that comes in waves, no matter how long ago the loss occurred, or how influential or insignificant the relationship was, still linger. This idea that death is a part of life isn't meant to minimize or distract from that grief, or help you move past it. Rather, death is something we *should* take with us. We *should* talk about them because it is part of this journey we are all on.

We generally refrain from talking about death much, besides funerals and All Saints Day. We like to keep the idea of dying at arms length, only really interacting with it when it is inescapable. Our TVs, phones, and magazines are rampant with ways to avoid even the thought of aging or dying. There are skincare and beauty routines to keep us young. Health and fitness trends to extend our lives. There are even people out there who are obsessed with reversing the aging process altogether. We have a hardwired predisposition to fear death. It's always there in the back of our minds if we're honest. It might not be a constant shadow over our days, but it is always lingering. We attempt to fight back at death. We try to beat it. Or instead, we look for ways to outlive death by making our mark on the world that will outlast us. Rather, Jesus came to defeat death's control of our lives, and offer us a new way of living. A way of life that embraces the process of death. Here's Richard Rohr again:

> **Death and life are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other. Each time you surrender, each time you trust the dying, your faith is led to a deeper level and you discover a Larger Self underneath. You decide not to push yourself to the front of the line, and something much better happens in the back of the line. You let go of your narcissistic anger, and you find that you start feeling much happier. You surrender your need to control your partner, and finally the relationship blossoms or ends. Yet each time it is a choice—and each time it is a kind of dying. It seems we only know what life is when we know what death is.**

We commemorate two sides of that coin today. We remember those we love who have left this earth, and we celebrate all they have meant to us. And in our faith walks, there are also two sides of a coin. A spiritual death and a spiritual life. Those we remember today played a part in our spiritual journeys to get us where we are now. To this very place.

Maybe you didn't come forward to light a candle today, but there is someone in your life who made a difference. Someone who modeled what it looks like to die to yourself, so that others may find life. We honor them today. And the question then becomes, what do you need to let die so there can be new life? What does self-sacrifice look like for the benefit of others? This is the pattern laid out by Jesus. And the choice is ours to make.

> **All of us have to eventually learn to let go of something smaller so something bigger can happen. But that's not a religion—it's highly visible truth. It is the Way Reality Works. Yes, I am saying that the way things work and Christ are one and the same. This is not a religion to be either fervently joined or angrily rejected. It is a train ride already in motion. The tracks are visible everywhere. You can be a willing and happy traveler. Or not.**
>
> **- Richard Rohr**

To be a willing and happy traveler doesn't mean we don't acknowledge death or pretend it doesn't exist. In fact, it's the opposite. By acknowledging and remembering death we are taking away its taboo nature. We aren't hiding it or minimizing it. We are clearly saying death is part of life—and it hurts—but it is not in control. Death and dying are a similarity we all share. There is no escaping that. The thing about this train ride that we are all on is that we aren't on separate trains. We ride together. Some of us are fresh in grief or still dealing with its ebbs and flows, and some have found healing on the other side of it. We are gathered today, to not only share in grief together, but to share in the joy of remembrance. For those we love and still miss. For those with us now on the journey. And for Jesus, who, in the end, redeems all things. And so we, again, follow his lead, and share in this holy meal. Together. In grief, and in joy. In life and in death.