

# “Service of Remembrance”

## Homily by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

October 31, 2021

I have been with dying people, and the experience has often been beautiful. I'm sure many of you have sat beside the bedsides of loved ones passing away, perhaps even had the good fortune to sing to them or hold their hands, surrounding them with a circle of love made up of family members and friends.

Sadly, we know the experience is often different. Death can also be tragic, unexpected, and painful. An amazingly sad number of people die alone, as they often have during the COVID-19 pandemic. We live in a country where death has, by and large, been made into a medical experience, something to be avoided, rather than a natural course of events.

Yet, we know that death is not the final word, regardless of the circumstances. People we know and animals we love live on in our minds, our hearts, and our lives long after they die.

People's lives and their deaths leave their imprint on us, often in surprising ways. I remember the grief and shock of the parents whose twenty-one-year-old son died from an overdose, having become addicted to opioids after an injury in high school sports. The depth of their love and grief humbled me and all who grieved with them.

My husband's life was permanently changed after he witnessed a car accident driving home from work one afternoon, many years ago. A man was walking across the street when he was struck by a car. Bart pulled to the side of the road, knelt with the man, and ended up holding his hand as he was dying. "He just wanted to know he wasn't alone," Bart said. I witnessed the softening that happened with Bart that day. It has never left him.

I've been shocked by the surprises that can accompany death too. My own mother's skin became translucent as she sat in her living room with golden light surrounding her, even as her body was racked with pain from a lifetime of mistreatment and poor health care. Then there was the woman who came back to life as her family and I recited the Lord's Prayer over her hospital bed after she had been pronounced dead by the nurses, an experience that caused her

grown daughters to believe in miracles.

I've seen the struggles death can bring, such as the old man who was frustrated because he was ready to die before his body would let go or the young woman who was frozen in grief over her stillborn child.

So too have I been with those left behind after their loved one's death, as they made room for their layered and complicated feelings, shock, despondency, remorse, gratitude, and even relief. All of these are normal. There is no right way to die or to deal with the death of someone we love. There is only our way.

If anything unifies us, it is death. We all will die. We all will lose those we love. We can be assured of these things. Death is a great equalizer, even in its varieties of circumstance. Perhaps the question then is not how to stop from dying, but rather how to live our lives and the numbered days we have remaining.

Having conversations about death and how we live before we die can be transformative and helpful for everyone involved. Doing so can allow us to share our fears, our hopes, and our wishes for our deaths and our lives. Atul Gawande, author of *Being Mortal*, writes, "If end-of-life discussions were an experimental drug, the FDA would approve it."

Such conversations are not always easy to have. People fear that such talks are depressing or think they are not necessary. When I ask parishioners if they've talked with their loved ones about their wishes for their memorial services, they will often respond, referring to their family, "They know what I want." This isn't necessarily true.

People don't always know what you want. I've supported many families as they struggled to plan funerals, envision memorial services, and discuss distribution of belongings. You may think you've had these conversations, but it's good to have them periodically. They allow you to talk about what you want to happen to help others remember your life after you die and also allow you to say what matters to you while you are alive, how you want to die, and what quality of life means to you. In his book *The Five*

# “Service of Remembrance”

October 31, 2021 *page 2*

*Invitations*, Frank Ostaseski writes, “We will never know who we are and why we are here if we do not ask the uncomfortable questions.”<sup>1</sup>

It turns out that such exploration is life giving. We learn about ourselves as we prepare for and have these conversations, and also we help our loved ones. Becoming intimate with these things and able to talk about them makes our present more beautiful. We remind ourselves what matters. “Could we turn toward death like a master teacher and ask, ‘How, then, shall I live?’”<sup>2</sup> writes Ostaseski.

The question of what death has to teach us is core to the work of social science, medicine, and many theologies, notably Buddhism. In his decades of work as a chaplain at the Zen Buddhist Hospice Center in San Francisco, Frank Ostaseski identifies five things the dying can teach us. He calls them the five invitations:

1. Don’t wait
2. Welcome everything, push away nothing
3. Bring your whole self to the experience
4. Cultivate “don’t-know mind”
5. Find a place of rest in the middle of things

I invite you to consider each of these invitations for a moment and then choose one you are inspired to focus on over the next period of time.

The first invitation is, *don’t wait*. You’ve heard the question, “What would you do if you knew that this was your last day, or year?” What are you waiting to do...until you have the time, the money, or the energy? *Don’t wait*.

The next invitation is, *welcome everything, push away nothing*. Shonda Rhimes, creator of *Grey’s Anatomy*, spent a year saying “yes” to everything she was invited to do. I recently spent a week doing one thing every day that scared me. Welcoming everything is radical. It doesn’t mean we need to accept everything; however, we can be open to everything. We can ask what it has to teach us and how we might be changed by it. *Welcome everything, push away nothing*, the dying teach us.

One must *bring your whole self to the experience*,

1 Ostaseski, Frank. *The Five Invitations*, Flatiron Books, New York, NY, 2017, p. 2.

2 Ibid, p. 11.

however. This means we bring our heart and our curiosity, as well as our head and what we think we know to experiences.

Which brings us to the fourth invitation, *cultivate don’t-know mind*. This happens when we approach life with openness, allowing it to teach us and being open to being changed.

Finally, the dying teach us about the necessity of *finding a place of rest in the middle of things*. Nature is a great teacher of this truth. Author and anthropologist Angeles Arrien writes, “Nature’s rhythm is medium to slow. Many of us live in the fast lane, out of nature’s rhythm. There are two things we can never do in the fast lane: we can neither deepen our experience nor integrate it.”<sup>3</sup>

We can choose to slow down, or sometimes life does it for us. Seven years ago, I had a serious accident which landed me in the emergency room. As I lay there immobilized, I didn’t know how things would turn out or if I would survive. Surprisingly to me, the one thing I did know is that it would be fine if I died. I had absolutely no fear. None. I also knew that if I lived, I would share that death is not scary at appropriate times, like this time right now.

Japanese monks have a tradition of writing short poems before they die. Ostaseski practiced this with his hospice patients. I have one I would like to share with you now as I close my reflection. Here is a poem entitled “Sono’s Death Poem.”

### *Sono’s Death Poem*

*Don’t just stand there with your hair turning gray,  
soon enough the seas will sink your little island.  
So while there is still the illusion of time,  
set out for another shore.  
No sense packing a bag.  
You won’t be able to lift it into your boat.  
Give away all your collections.  
Take only new seeds and an old stick.  
Send out some prayers on the wind before you  
sail.  
Don’t be afraid.  
Someone knows you’re coming.  
An extra fish has been salted.*

Mona (Sono) Santacroce

The process of death can teach us what really

3 Ibid, p. 186.

# “Service of Remembrance”

October 31, 2021 *page 3*

matters, which for many of us is far less than we might think. Focus on those things that matter, my friends, and allow them to fill your days.

Amen and blessed be.

## RITUAL

In a moment I'm going to invite you to hold up the picture of the loved one you've lost. Before we do that, take out the picture, if you brought one. If you didn't, bring to your mind's eye a loved one who has died.

Looking at that picture, ask yourself what lives on from this person? What is one thing or two this person taught you? Tell the person that, starting with *"Thank you for teaching me...."*

Look into the person's eyes, say what about this person you miss, starting with *"I miss your..."*

And finally, say what it is you want this person to know, starting with *"I want you to know that..."*

Now, hold your photo in the air, so we can bring all these beloved souls into the sanctuary with us. Look around you. Feel the love in this space. Remember that these people are a part of us individually and collectively. They will always live on. Now, you may put them down.