

***IN THE MEMORY OF GOD***  
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine  
University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Psalm 139: 1- 18 NRSV**

**O Lord, you have searched me and known me.**

**You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.**

**You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.**

**Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.**

**You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.**

**Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.**

**Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?**

**If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.**

**If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.**

**If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is light to you.**

**For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.**

**I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.**

**Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.**

**My frame was not hidden from you, which I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.**

**Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.**

**In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them yet existed.**

**How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!**

**I try to count them – they are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with you.**

There is an old story about a little boy who was standing in the vestibule of his church one Sunday morning. He was looking at tall bronze plaques filled with the names of men and women. The minister noticed the little boy and wondered what was holding his attention. The boy asked, “Who are all these people?”

“Oh,” said the minister, “those are all of the people who died in the service.”

The little boy then asked, “Was that the morning service or the evening service?”

This Sunday is historically called “All Souls Sunday,” and it is to be distinguished from “All Saints Day.” The Celebration of All Saints began early in the Christian church as martyrs were added to the church’s memory. There came a point in time when there were more martyrs than there were days in the year.

About the year 610 the Catholic Church set aside one day, 1 November, as the day to memorialize all the confessors, saints, and martyrs of the church. The purpose was not so much the adoration or worship of saints, but rather the glorification of God’s grace in real men and women as they existed in history. It was a celebration of the triumph of God’s grace and the effective witness of these Christians who offer us a model of faith. All Saints is meant to be an affirmation of their examples

of faith, hope, and love and the conviction that these are eternal values. The danger of All Saints is the extremes of veneration or emotionalism.

All Souls, on the other hand, is the remembering of people who are not so distinguished in life or death. They are not martyrs for the faith. All Souls is a celebration that is offered in the hope that our loved ones will share in the victory of the risen Christ.

All Saints and All Souls raise a similar question of hope about eternal life. Both run the risk of sentimentalism that imagines a grand family reunion. There are some who hope that a dear saint might intervene on our behalf and help us win that lottery or heal us from disease. There are others who hope that in heaven mom and dad will not be divorced, though I am certain that many would think they had gone to hell under such circumstances. We hunger, of course, for immortality and can scarce believe that there is no future for us beyond this body and this life.

My grandfather was a great lover of animals and treated his beagle dogs with utmost care. He fed, groomed, and walked them daily. He prepared special dishes made of stewed chicken gizzards and hearts. When his dogs got old and arthritic he massaged their hips and joints with warming liniments. My grandmother said that when she died she wanted to come back as one of grandpa's dogs.

As you know I am not a literalist and I do not entertain ideas about reincarnation as a beagle or heaven as an endless family picnic. I do, however,

carry the saints and souls of my life in deep memory. And I am certain that they carry eternal verities that are blessed by God.

I am amused by the fact that people usually speak of eternity as a time and place beyond death. They are usually referencing their own death, as though eternity begins with their personal demise. It's as if everyone who has died in the last ten thousand years has been waiting for you to die so that they could pass on to eternity.

I think eternity is timeless and what we call time or history is cradled in the spectrum of infinity. It is like a sentence the beginning or ending of which you cannot find. In that spectrum of Word is a parenthetical statement. We find our lives somewhere in that parenthesis. To put it another way, the question you often see painted on bridge columns, "Where will you spend eternity?" is a moot question. We are spending it. We are in the midst of it. We were swept out of a dark void into the midst of creation and we will move past this world and what we call life. In my own mind this means that God has brought me this far and I trust that God will carry me into the future.

What that future looks like I cannot really imagine. But it seems to me it is beyond all description. Again, I can only trust the Impetus that brought me so far along to move me further down roads beyond my vision.

This is also where I find the words of the Psalmist both instructional and inspiring. The last words of this morning's reading were, "I come to the end – I am still with you." The entire 139<sup>th</sup> psalm is an acknowledgment that life is permeated by and permeates the Source. There is no place we can go and no thought that we can express absent from the presence of God. Tom Mahon described it this way:

"Instead of picturing God as a medieval monarch on a marble throne, imagine God as the living awareness in the space between the atoms, "empty" space that makes up 99.99% of the universe. Thinking of God that way gets us past some of the great theological divides of the past. Is God immanent or transcendent, internal or external, composed or compassionate? Like the question of whether the atom is a wave or a particle, the answer is yes."<sup>1</sup>

I do not mean to be sentimental. But let me try to offer an example. My mother in died in 1999. Her ashes run the currents of the Gulf of Mexico, along with my father's. There are deep gaps in her particles, dissolved as they are. There is a growing space between her physical presence and mine. But I tell you; those spaces do not represent a void. There is life between them and amongst them. There is no emptiness and certainly no vacuum. There are nutrients, stories, and memories that continue to fill my relationship with them. They are not lost,

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Mahon quoted in *Reflections on the Nature of God*, Michael Reagan, ed. (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2004), p 44.

nor floating in some mysterious ether. They are riding the waves of God's continuum. They have never left the caring hand of the Creator.

Walt Whitman wrote in *Leaves of Grass*:

Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost,  
No birth, identity, for – no object of the world,  
Nor life, nor force, nor any visible thing;  
Appearance must not foil, not shifted sphere confuse thy brain.  
Ample are time and space – ample the fields of Nature.  
The body, sluggish, aged, cold – the embers left from earlier fires,  
The light of the eye grown dim shall duly flame again;  
The sun now low in the West rises for mornings and for noons continual'  
To frozen clods ever the spring's invisible law returns,  
With grass and flowers and summer fruits and corn.

And so the question for me on this All Souls Sunday is not who has joined the church triumphant. Who rests in the arms of the Father and who does not? I do not wonder who are saved and who are damned. I have no doubts about who is spending eternity – how or where. There is no place any one of us can go that escapes the mind of the Creator.

The only question, and one I think I can only ask for myself, is whether I am spending eternity gracefully. Is my life in its forms and formlessness, in its physical being and spiritual dimension faithful to the image God calls me to be? Is my life a credit to the time and space I am filling or is it a real waste of time?

A bit of old Irish wisdom:

Do not stand at my grave and weep,  
I am not there...I do not sleep.  
I am the thousand winds that blow...  
I am the diamond glints on snow...  
I am the sunlight on ripened grain...  
I am the gentle autumn rain.  
When you waken in the morning's hush,  
I am the swift uplifting rush  
Of gentle birds on circling flight...  
I am the soft star that shines at night.  
Do not stand at my grave and cry –  
I am not there...I did not die...

May we so live our lives that our eyes are always open to those we remember, and seem them in the wind and ripened grain. May we have the eyes of faith to feel them in gentle wind and rain. May we have the hands of faith to hold our loved ones in their children and grandchildren, giggling and snuggling on our laps. May we catch their spirit in the flight of birds. May we so trust God to their continuous care.

*Finis*