

1 November 2020 (All Saints Day)

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

If you're a film buff, you may remember a Bergman 'classic', *The Seventh Seal*, made in 1957. It's set in the time of the Black Plague, but it's full of mid-century *angst*.

Its most famous scene is the arrival of 'Death', a pasty-faced figure in a ghoulish black cape. Death has come for the protagonist, a knight named Antonius Block. But Block lures Death into a game of chess instead, perhaps to delay the inevitable, or perhaps, if he should win the game, to free himself forever from Death's clammy grip. As if one could.

Years later, Woody Allen lampooned this scene, only the game is not chess but gin rummy. Here's a bit of it:

NAT: If you win, I'll go immediately. If I win, give me some more time.
One more day.

DEATH: Who's got time to play gin rummy?

NAT: Come on. If you're so good.

DEATH: I really shouldn't.

NAT: I got cards right here. Don't make a production.

DEATH: All right, come on. We'll play a little. It'll relax me.

NAT (*getting cards, pad, and pencil*): You won't regret this.

DEATH: Don't give me a sales talk. Get the cards and give me a Fresca and put out something. For God's sake, a stranger drops in and you don't have potato chips or pretzels?

They play. Nat wins at gin rummy. Death goes broke and can't afford his motel room for the night.

Delay, denial, and humour. These are the only weapons we have against Death. "What about modern medicine?" you ask. But that falls under 'delay'. It can't stave off death forever.

"What about faith then?" That falls under 'denial' or 'humour' (i.e., a sick joke) according to the 'New Atheists'. They're half right, but only half. Faith can't undo death or make it unreal, no. All faith can do is furnish us with the strength that hope imparts when 'Death' comes to call. As it will.

I remember *The Seventh Seal* when All Saints Day rolls around. Bergman filmed it in black-and-white. The louring sky and colourless landscape resemble our grey Novembers. On All Saints Day we remember and read aloud the names of those who have died. And on Remembrance Day we do it again for those who have died in times of war. So, November's motto could very well be *memento mori*, "Remember you shall die..."

The Cowardly, Secular Way of Death

Long ago, when someone's life ended, a cry went up: "Someone in our midst has died!" The whole community put its life 'on hold'. They carried the body to a sacred place. They gave thanks to God for the gift this person was. They lowered the body into a grave, entrusting this person to Divine Mercy. Nothing was more important than this. Nothing.

Their grief was raw and palpable. But the ritual was strong enough to contain its pain, to mould all that mourning into something meaningful, making it bearable.

But more and more, when someone dies, the community's life is *not* put 'on hold'. Someone's death is now – let's face it – an annoying interruption. Still, reluctantly, some people manage to go through the motions.

"How's a week from next Wednesday?" asks a dutiful daughter trying to fix a date for the funeral home.

"Can't," says a cousin. "We're leaving on a cruise."

A brother has work commitments. A grandchild has a school exam. Another couple has arranged for a contractor to put an addition on their cottage, and do you know how hard it was to book him? "We *really* have to be at the cottage then!"

No, don't let's put our lives on hold. Let's put the funeral on hold instead. In fact, let's not have a funeral at all. Let's gather at the Golf and Curling Club in a few months, maybe. We'll tell some 'remember when' stories. We'll guffaw and grin widely as we clink the ice in our tumblers. None of that morbid funeral talk, that superstitious God-dogma. We'll call it a 'Celebration of Life'. Isn't *laughter* more celebratory, more life-affirming?

No, I think such laughter is life-denying, precisely because it's death-avoiding. "Woe to you who laugh now, for you *will* mourn and weep," Jesus

once said. But we'll weep all alone, without the consolations of community, and without a ritual container to receive all our grief.

Our society, so materially wealthy and so arrogantly sure of itself, is too spiritually weak and too emotionally immature to face death head-on, never mind play gin rummy with it.

The funerals we now refuse to have might have soberly, somberly, taught us truly to feel grief's singular style of pain, *but without coming undone*. We could have matured in wisdom, and in the knowledge and love of God. Our souls could have been made richer and deeper by singing life's resonant notes of sadness. We could have been consoled by the strength only hope can impart.

But we're afraid of that. Fear sneers at Religion. It snickers at Ritual.

More and more, when someone dies, a professional in the 'death industry' arrives, removes the body, and it's never seen again. A firm called "Got Junk" will do the same for your worn-out chesterfield. Their work is briskly efficient, materialist, and 'utilitarian', slotting smoothly into our capitalist economy. Later, someone may remember to retrieve the ashes to be scattered somewhere, or stored in a cupboard, or simply set aside and forgotten.

Have we lost the ability to face death, to feel our grief head on? I think we have. And I mourn this loss of mourning. For when we behave as though *one* person's death is not worth mourning, *everyone's* life is cheapened. Yours too.

When we deny death, we lessen life.

Part 2, in which I rant and rave some more...

I presided at a woman's funeral many years ago. Her daughter-in-law asked me: "In the service, could you please not use the word 'death'?"

"How can I not use the word death?" I asked. "You *do* know that your mother-in-law is dead, don't you?" Too rude? Yes, I get that a lot.

Authentic Christian faith cannot tiptoe around death. No one is helped when we do. I wince at the new, delicate euphemism for death: 'passed'. Are we too fragile even to say, 'passed on', or 'passed away'? Such shallow secularism is a tragic loss of wisdom and maturity. It infantilises our emotions. It's a cowardly refusal to shoulder the work of grief.

The ancient traditions of All Hallows Eve (i.e., 'Halloween', the night before All Saints Day) were all about facing our fear for 'things that go bump in the night': ghosts, malicious spirits, the grim reaper, death itself. The jack-o-

lantern was not a cartoonish beacon for pampered kiddies wanting sweets, it was a scary dare, and a menacing totem to frighten them for once.

But our growing fashion for kitschy, suburban Halloween displays – plastic skeletons, mock tombstones, smiling zombies, and friendly ghosts – is all tongue-in-cheek and PG 13, like an episode of Scooby Doo. “Happy Halloween,” we say to the five-year-old dressed up as Frankenstein’s monster. (Happy? What happened to scary?) “I really like that nail in your forehead. Here, have some sweets.”

Having slipped the moorings of serious Christian and old-fashioned Pagan rituals, All Hallows Eve has joined the ‘holiday industry’. It now fits seamlessly into our juvenile, consumer culture. Like death itself.

Making the ‘scary’ into something infantile to avert our fears, including our fear of death, will never produce the mature laughter that follows real grief, the deep joy that Jesus promised and funerals prepare us for. It teaches the juvenile laughter that *avoids* grief. It tutors us in the game of ‘let’s pretend’.

A dear friend, now dead, had a rain barrel outside his back door. One night he heard faint crying. He found two baby raccoons thrashing about. Very gently, he tipped the barrel over, and they tumbled out. He was too late. One of them had drowned. But the other wouldn’t leave its sibling.

“It sat by its side for hours,” he said, his voice laden with melancholy. It seems even raccoons have rituals of mourning – but why should I say ‘*even*’? Isn’t all sentient life born with an instinct to love, and therefore to mourn, each in its own way?

After my grandfather died, my grandmother wore his wristwatch. I imagine, whenever she glanced at it, a tremor of memory washed through her. Was it the memory of a deep grief once felt ‘head-on’, or was it the memory of a deeper and abiding joy? Both, surely. For pain and joy are, equally, symptoms of love.

And in other News....

A card arrived in the Church’s mailbox this week:

“To all the Congregation of Elmwood Avenue Church,

“First, I would like to thank you for all the condolences at the passing of Pat James. You all lift up my heart from a great sadness to joy, and I will always

cherish her in my heart. Thank you also for all the get well wishes, phone calls, and cards. They give me the will to get better and to live longer.

“Yours in good faith,

“Bill Booth”

Finally!

To ease our passage through this pernicious pandemic, the London Centre of the Royal Canadian College of Organists (RCCO), headed by our own Lorraine Clark and Paul Merritt, are presenting a series of four Organ Recitals.

The first one stars our own Angus Sinclair, and it's very worth watching and hearing, believe me. Here's the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9eqWTm1Evo>

Still to come....

- November 1: Erich Knapp – Music Director at First St. Andrew's United Church, London;
- November 9: A Young Kim – Organ Scholar at Metropolitan United Church, London;
- November 16: Kennedy Kimber Johnson – Music Director at Colborne Street United Church, London.

Happy listening.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew