

November 1, 2020 – Matthew 5:1-12 & Revelation 7:2-17

As some of you may know, but many may not, my father passed away when I was very young. Only 4 years old. And for close to 20 years after his death, I never once visited his gravesite. Some might hear that and assume that it was out of fear or sadness or anger that I didn't go, but those had very little to do with it.

Simply put, I didn't visit my father's grave because I was taught that there was nothing there to visit. Nothing important, at least. After all, my father wasn't in that grave. He was in heaven.

And my own memories of the event reinforced that idea. For though I didn't really understand everything that was going on, I still distinctly remember visiting the funeral home before the funeral. Of going up to the casket and seeing his body and being rather surprised by it.

Not just because he was dead, but because the man in that casket wasn't my father. In my 4 year old eyes, what was in that casket wasn't even really human. It felt more like looking at a mannequin than a person. The man who was my father was already long gone. And so visiting his grave just never really held any value to me.

Now I know to some, that thought is startling, even shocking. Because for many, visiting the grave of a loved one is a cherished tradition and a vitally important means of mourning their death and coping with the loss. And the very last thing I would want you to take from this is that I'm somehow criticizing that act. I'm not.

On the contrary, I bring this up specifically to point out that everyone grieves differently. Grief is always unique to a person. The things we do and say when we grieve. The length of time that we grieve. The emotions we feel and the ways that we express them when we grieve. All different for every person. There are, certainly, healthier and unhealthier ways to grieve, but there really isn't any right or wrong way to grieve.

And the way that we grieve isn't even always consistent to each person. Because of my childhood experiences, one of the things I've studied a bit is how children grieve. It's a complex issue. Largely because the way that a child mourns the loss of a loved one is constantly changing. Every day that they mature, their grief matures with them. Every day that they understand better their personality and identity and emotions, they also understand better their sadness and their anger and their loss.

But that's true of adults too, I suppose. It may not be happening at quite the rapid pace of a child. But the way that you or I grieve the day after someone close to us dies is different than the way we grieve a year after they've died. Or ten years after. Or twenty years after. Grief is a moving target.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells us, "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*" And it struck me that that's an very simple way to describe something that is so tremendously complex. Because just as mourning is unique and changing, you would expect that comfort in our mourning is also unique and changing.

And, indeed, that's what scripture describes God's comfort to be, because our comfort is found in Christ's death and resurrection. And in many respects, St Paul tells us that we should look at Christ's death and resurrection to see and understand our own death and resurrection.

He suffered and died at the hands of a sinful world. We suffer and die at the hands of a sinful world. He physically and spiritually rose from the dead at the Father's command. We physically and spiritually will rise from the dead at the Father's command. He lives and reigns eternally as the Son of God. We live and reign eternally as children of God.

We are all bound together with Christ in his resurrection. And when he revealed himself to his followers after his resurrection, he gave them his comfort. Comfort that was unique and specific to their own grief.

To the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who began to doubt the authenticity of Jesus' ministry, Jesus comes and reveals himself by teaching them the prophecies of the true Messiah. To the apostles who had traveled for so long as a single close-knit family, Jesus comes to them as they meet together as a family. To Mary Magdalene, whose grief blinded her from even recognizing his face in the garden, Jesus comes and simply calls her by name.

Three different groups of grieving disciples. Three completely different acts of love and comfort. No matter the uniqueness of your grief, God will come and reveal the hope of his Son to you in exactly the way you need to hear it. Whether it's in the promises of eternal life found in Scripture. Or the fellowship of your brothers and sisters in Christ within the Church. Or being reminded that those who die in the Lord are called by name as His beloved children. Those who mourn will be comforted.

But God's comfort even goes beyond that. It extends into an act of love that is so great that it can comfort anyone, no matter how they grieve. And it is found right there on the altar. We don't normally think about the Lord's Supper as a place to find comfort. Forgiveness, yes. Strength, renewal, faith... all these, certainly. But on this All Saints Day, it's a place of comfort as well.

Because as we come before that altar, we come before the very body and blood of the Lamb who was slain. We come before the throne of God itself. We come and take part in the feast of the Lamb. Where there is no hunger or thirst, because the Lamb gives of Himself to us all the food and drink we need.

But we don't go there alone. We go there with all the saints. We go there with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ gathered here today. We go there with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who take part in the Sacrament of the Altar.

And, most importantly today, we go there with all those saints who have come before us and now eat the same divine food with us. 144,000, Revelation tells us. 12 times 12 times 1000. A symbolic way of saying, "The tribe of all tribes for all eternity."

We don't receive the Lord's Supper alone. We receive it with every loved one we have ever known who has died in the faith and now rests from their labors. All the family and friends in the faith that you have ever known and loved.

We gather and we have a meal with them once more. And the only difference between our meal and their meal, is that we see the meal only under the veil of bread and wine, but they see it in its heavenly glory.

"I believe in the communion of saints." We say those words in the Apostles' Creed, but do you realize how you participate in them? The Church in this building, the Church around the world, and the Church in heaven. We are all the saints and we commune together.

So today, you don't need to go to your loved one's gravesite to remember them. To feel close to them. Simply take and eat the Lamb's body given for you. Take and drink the Lamb's blood shed for you. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne is our shepherd. And he has gathered his entire flock, all those who follow his voice – here or in heaven – to this spring of living water today.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are all those who come to the Lord's Table this day. For though you mourn, you will find comfort in this meal. Amen.