

*Flowers in the Crypt*  
October 29, 2017

Last Sunday evening after our silent movie/organ music night, there was a message waiting for me when I got home. Someone at Life Care was dying and his family wanted a Protestant minister to come to see him. The family had no connection with any of the Scituate churches, so someone at Life Care thought to call me. The man's son greeted me as I approached the room. Inside, his grandson and daughter-in-law sat on either side of the bed holding his hands. The man's breathing indicated that he was nearing the end of his life. I asked his family what would be helpful and his son said, "He's afraid of dying. And we haven't done this before." "Yes," I said, "we're all afraid of that." I invited them to form a circle with me around the bed, all holding hands with the grandson and me holding the hands of the man on the bed. And I prayed. I prayed that his fear would be eased, that he would know that as the love of God had held him before his life began and had held him through all the days of this life, that he could trust that that love wouldn't let him go even though he was going into the unknown, and that through the love he had offered he would still remain connected to his loved ones left behind. When I finished, we said the Lord's Prayer, the family thanked me, said they would be okay, and I went home. Though I left my number, I didn't hear from them, so I don't know "the rest of the story." I hope that my prayer comforted all of them, but what may have been most comforting to the man and to his family was that they were all together in that room, touching and talking and staying through the end. They said they didn't know what to do, but they were doing what needs to be done: they were accompanying the person they loved as far as life could take them together.

He was afraid. They were afraid. But so are we all afraid in the face of death, that "undiscovered country from whose bourn/No traveler returns," as Shakespeare described it. Death is the end of all we have known and, depending on your view of the afterlife, the end of all we have been. Many religious scholars have theorized that the human fear of death is the beginning of every religion and every ritual. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which at over 4,000 years old is the earliest surviving work of literature, the hero Gilgamesh reflects on the death of his friend Enkidu: "Thou hast become dark and cannot hear me. When I die shall I not be like Enkidu? Sorrow enters my heart. I am afraid of death." And his question comes to all of us at some point in our lives: shall we too not follow our loved ones into death?

How we deal with that fear, whether we acknowledge it or suppress it, shapes our lives. Denying it, we may try to taunt death by engaging in death-

defying behaviors; we may try to prove its ending won't apply to us by building up false immortalities of wealth and power; we may try to insulate ourselves from its power by withdrawing from relationships so that death can take nothing from us. According to the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, our attitude toward death even shapes our children's lives: He wrote, "Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death."

In its ancient roots in Celtic tribes, the festival of Halloween reflects those people's fear of death. With the harvest brought in and stored, they prepared for long, dark, sometimes lean months when often people died. November 1 for them was the beginning of the year and marked a "thin place" between the seasons when they believed the dead came back to visit their old homes and revenge any wrongs left over from their lives. So they would set out meals for them and go to bed early lest they encounter one of their angry dead.

Christianity adopted the Greek understanding of a happy after-life for those who merited it – think of the Elysian Fields where the heroes rested and feasted - and that image eased people's fears that their dead would come back mad at them. Why would they come back if they were in a pleasant place? Over time, Halloween became less about appeasing the returning dead and more about acknowledging the fear of our own deaths. So we try on the masks of death and live behind them for a night, looking out upon the world through the eyes of one who has crossed over. Halloween invites us to embody and engage our fear of death and that's why we celebrate it here in church every year on the Sunday before All Souls Day: The Universalist All Souls Day assures us that those we love who have died are still part of the love which holds us all, whatever each of us may believe about what happens after death. The pagan Halloween reminds us that though we too must cross that line, we can safely inhabit the fear.

We don't have to wait for Halloween of course though to look at the fear. A walk in the graveyard, like this afternoon's, has long been a time to contemplate mortality. Thanks to the beauty and restraint of our New England cemeteries, though, no emotion stronger than melancholy usually disturbs such walks. In the past, visits to places of burial were more likely to confront people with their fears. With my family, I experienced that last month when we visited the crypt under the church of Santa Maria della Concezione in Rome. The church is attached to a Capuchin monastery, and for centuries, the monks have been buried there in soil brought from the holy city of Jerusalem. But it's a small space without room for individual graves for the nearly 4000 monks who have been laid to rest there over the years. So the custom developed of the longest buried monk being disinterred to

make room for the newest burial. After an average of years in the soil, the bodies had decomposed and only bones were left. The bones would be piled around the sides of the chambers. At some point in the late 16 or early 1700's someone – no one



knows who – turned the bones into art. Taking pictures in the crypt isn't allowed – these pictures are all from the monastery's website and others who had permission to take photographs. It's not as light as in the picture, but there are lights set into the walls and daylight from windows along one side of the corridor.

qThe crypt isn't deep in the earth; it's more like a basement built into a hill – there is a corridor with six chambers coming off of it.



Even though we knew what the crypt held, it took a minute to realize that the decorations we were seeing were made from the bones of the monks. The sign to the right – here it is-



says in many languages, "What you are now, we used to be. What we are now, you will be." The Marquis de Sade left the first written record of a visit to this place; he described it as a "monument of funerary art." This slide from the Crypt of the

Three Skeletons gives you a sense of that:



The 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne used it to set up an ominous scene in his novel *The Marble Faun*. And ominous it is.

Only the final room, the Mass Chapel, has no bones. All the others are filled with decorations – all made from the bones. Some have full skeletons dressed in their monks' robes as this slide from the Crypt of the Three Skeletons, but all of them are filled with bone flowers, bone cherubs, bone archways, and



bone chandeliers.



In addition to the Crypt of the Three Skeletons, there is the Crypt of the Skulls,



the Crypt of the Leg Bones and Thigh Bones



the Crypt of Pelvises



and the Crypt of the Resurrection.

I found them horrible and beautiful at the same time. They made me think about our human mortality, my human mortality, but also about the beauty each of us leaves behind, sometimes knowingly, but often, like the bones of our skeletons, in ways we would never imagine. And all this gruesome, unique art paradoxically

made death seem more ordinary, more a normal part of life. My son Oliver reflected that he found it reassuring – though it may seem creepy at first, that seeing all of these people who crossed from life into death made him feel like he'd be able to make that crossing too when the time came.

Though no one knows what the artist had in mind, I think that this is what he hoped to convey – that death is not to be feared. His art seemed to have that effect on the monks. Mark Twain visited the crypt and described the monk who gave him a tour in *Innocents Abroad*:

*The reflection that he must someday be taken apart like an engine or a clock...and worked up into arches and pyramids and hideous frescoes, did not distress this monk in the least. I thought he even looked as if he were thinking, with complacent vanity, that his own skull would look well on top of the heap and his own ribs add a charm to the frescoes which possibly they lacked at present.*

Twain mocks the monk, but wouldn't it be a gift to be so comfortable with the prospect of death that we too could contemplate the future of our mortal remains so cheerfully?

Perhaps Oliver found the crypt strangely hopeful because it offers in its own way examples of the comfort I was trying to offer last Sunday night to the family I visited: trust in the love that surrounds us and the love that will live on after us from all our life-giving creations, whether made from bones, or food, paints or wood, grand speeches or quiet acts of care. Those connections of our own actions and our human ties, the love we spread, help us to live with our fears of death.

- Pamela M. Barz