

HOMILY SUNDAY 31 – A

“All Souls Day”

(Lamentations 3:17-26; Psalm 103; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57; Mt 11:25-30)

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Many years ago, as a young Oblate seminarian, I was privileged to fly into the northern community of Cree Lake with a brother Oblate for a few days of visiting and fishing. We stayed in a log cabin built by a Norwegian trapper for the legendary late Fr. Louis Morauld.

The cabin was located high up on a hilly point overlooking the pristine water of the lake. To cook and wash, however, one had to fetch water from the lake, an arduous task using two pails. That laborious task was transformed into a delightful jaunt by the discovery of a neck yoke hanging on a wall behind the door. Using this yoke, we could literally bounce up the hill carrying two pails of water without spilling a drop. The gospel for today, in which Jesus asks us to take up his yoke that is easy and light, takes on a whole new meaning for me now.

Today’s feast of *All Soul’s* follows on the heels of the feast that we celebrated yesterday, *All Saint’s*. That is so appropriate, for they complement one another, and link beautifully with the yoke that Jesus speaks about.

Yesterday we celebrated, honored and remembered all our loved ones who truly loved God and followed Jesus and whom we are convinced are united with him now in eternal life and bliss.

Today, with true Catholic spirituality, we remember and pray for all our loved ones and indeed all those whom we do not know, who have left this world with unfinished business, with incompleteness, carrying some guilt and fear and anger with them from unresolved personal issues and broken relationships with others. “God’s hurt is people’s broken brotherhood” is a phrase that is found in the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayer of the Church, and how true that is.

As Catholics, we believe that death is not the end. We believe that the powerful, merciful and healing love of God continues to work in us and among us, bringing healing to those who found it impossible to be reconciled with others while walking on this earth. The reasons for this can be as varied as there are human beings. Each person carries their own mystery, and we must respect that. But God’s ways are not our ways, and God is always at work, bringing about the fullness of God’s reign in ways that we would and could not imagine.

Some years ago, I experienced that mysterious powerful eternal presence of God that we celebrate with these dual feasts of *All Saints* and *All Souls*. As a teenager, I had struggled in my relationship with my father. He was a hard-working farmer who in terms of addictions awareness would be called a work-a-holic. Growing up on the farm we never did any recreational things together such as fishing or hunting. He was always too busy

working. I began to resent that and started to act out of that resentment, arguing with him and trying to convince him that he had raised us the wrong way.

At a retreat for priests four years after I was ordained, we were encouraged to forgive our fathers. I said a short prayer and thought I had. However, a couple years later I visited a family where I saw a child asleep on her father on the couch. As I drove away, I became aware of feelings of loneliness, envy, self-pity and anger that told me that I had not forgiven my father, indeed, that I could not. I felt fear and powerlessness. I, a priest who preached love and forgiveness every Sunday, could not even forgive my own father.

Fortunately, the thought of being “powerless” brought to mind the 12 Step program. I turned to that program for help at this critical point of my life. Step one helped me articulate my dilemma: I was powerless over that un-forgiveness in my heart. In the process of working those Steps, I realized that I was acting like my father and therefore must be feeling like him. At that moment of understanding, the forgiveness happened. I went to visit him, asked him to forgive me and we were reconciled. Sensing the change in me, he changed overnight. We had two good years together before he died, visiting without arguing and talking about all kinds of things.

I thought that was as good as it gets, until eleven years later a friend who knew my story shared with me his observation that “acting out of anger towards my father for all those fifteen years was not the same as sitting down with my father and sharing my feelings of anger with him.” I was stunned at the truth of the simple statement. After my father and I were reconciled, we had talked about many things, but never about us. I had never once shared with my father, while he was alive, my feelings about how he had raised us. There was some unfinished business between us.

I intuitively knew what I had to do. I made a one day retreat during which I wrote a seven page letter to my father, pouring out on those pages all the feelings that I had never shared with him while he was alive. I read the letter to a pillow representing him and cried a few tears. A week later, I shared with that friend what I had done. He asked me if it was more like an adult-to-adult relationship with my father now. Again I was stunned. That was it. By writing that letter and reading it to my father, I had shared my feelings with him in a mature, grown-up way and we had become friends. It was a whole new relationship.

As I drove home that day, it was like I was wearing motorcycle goggles. The color of the world had changed, so powerful was this experience. And with a feeling of awe, I realized that I was experiencing the Communion of the Saints and All Soul’s Day all rolled into one. If I was healing and growing in my relationship with my father down here because of this humble letter, then I believe that he was healing and growing in his relationship with me where ever he was. For me, he was entering heaven, becoming one of the saints. I am convinced it was at this time that I received my father’s spirit to be with me in a new way.

Is that not what Jesus promised Mary Magdalene in the garden after his resurrection when he appeared to her? He gently told her not to cling to him, teaching her that if she would only believe in him as Risen Lord, grieve his loss and let him ascend to the Father, she would receive his spirit in a new way at Pentecost. In that same way, I now feel my father's presence with me always and do not miss him at all. What a joy that is. I can only be eternally grateful for this God-given grace and stand in awe at the depth and power of God's love given to the humble ones who truly believe.

As the scripture commentators put it, the message of Jesus is not grasped by wisdom and understanding, but by revelation. Only the simple have accepted the insight the Father grants to those who wish it. There is a sense that Jewish wisdom and learning or knowledge of the Law was a very real obstacle to the understanding of the message of Jesus. The more one knew about the Law, the more difficult it was to see that the messianic revelation would supersede the Law. *All has been given ...* this is a direct contradiction of the Jewish claim to have the complete revelation of God in the Law and the Prophets. Jesus has a unique relation with the Father that others do not, a relationship that he wants us to realize and experience in our own lives.

Jesus asks us to shoulder his yoke, a yoke that is easy and light. The law of love for God, for others, for ourselves and for all creation is as simple as that and as simple as living the beatitudes. This is basically all we need to focus on as followers of Jesus. To shoulder his yoke is to allow Jesus to help us carry our burdens. It is to ask him each day in humble prayer to give us the ability to admit our own powerlessness and human need and then it becomes easy, because he is doing most of the work, like a child carrying a pail of water with an adult, or an adult using a neck yoke.

In the second reading, the letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of our belief in the resurrection of the body on the last day. He also articulates the hope we have in the light of that faith that our mortal bodies will be changed, transfigured, transformed into an imperishable and immortal body at the end of time.

In the gospel, Jesus brings all this closer to home. He speaks of a mystery hidden from the learned and the clever and revealed to the poor and the humble. He speaks of sharing with them what he alone knows because of his intimate relationship with the Father. Then he goes on to say that if we trust in him and take up his yoke, his vision, we will already share in his *rest*.

What Jesus is saying is that for those who believe, the reality of new, divine, eternal life that Paul is speaking about in terms of a future resurrection of our physical bodies already becomes a reality for us now spiritually. Through humble faith in Jesus and following his way of loving forgiveness, we already share in that mystery hidden from the self-righteous, the mystery of the kingdom of God already begun in our lives. That kingdom, that *rest*, is a reign of peace, joy and freedom that is given only to those who are open to it and truly seek it. It was that kingdom; that *rest*, that I believe I experienced in the healing of my relationship with my father eleven years after he died.

The Eucharist that we now celebrate is a moment of union with all those saints who have gone before us and even now share in the eternal banquet in heaven. It is also a powerful prayer for continued healing of relationships with all those who have gone before us who still carry some incompleteness. As we celebrate his Word and receive his Body and Blood, we already enter more fully into that rest that only Jesus can give.

So on this feast of *All Souls*, let us rejoice in the saints who have gone before us, and pray that all souls may continue to journey with us towards sainthood, so that someday God will be all in all.