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Pentecost 26B/All Saints/
Peace, Seattle
November 1, 2015
Revelation 21:1-6A, Mark 12:28-34

EMBODYING THE SPIRIT OF LOVE

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. It has never been clearer than this.

And Jesus did more than tell us what love was, he showed us. And he called us to follow.

Love in the manner of Jesus, after all, is a VERB, it's something we DO, we EMBODY.
"WE LOVE, BECAUSE GOD FIRST LOVED US."

When loving happens, community happens. Without love there can be no community. On this All Saints Sunday we're reminded that, not only is love our origin—the source of the life we share—it is our destiny. As St. Paul says, LOVE NEVER ENDS.

One of the gifts of being part of a community like Peace is seeing how God's love finds expression in the lives of the people we come to know as sisters and brothers—and we're remembering three of them today.

These three beloved saints—Elma, Al, Kathryn—had a knack for knowing what the spirit of community and love was about, where it came from.

Elma, who with her husband Elmer was well into her 80's when we first met, may have looked fragile on the outside, but she showed me the tenacious side of love. After one illness or another kept one or both absent from worship, I'd think—**"That's it. We won't be seeing Elma or Elmer here anymore."**

Then the next week, along both of them would come, she with her walker, he with a cane in each hand; moving a bit slower, perhaps, but here in the flesh nonetheless.
Eager for a word from the Lord and for a foretaste of the feast to come; glad to be among God's people making another little dress rehearsal for resurrection!

The gravity of grace and the loving friendships they had here pulled them out of bed on Sundays, got them into their car and up the hill! As long as they could manage they wouldn't let anything get in the way of that!

Sharing in the sacrament of Holy Communion was particularly important for Elma.
I'll never forget how, with Elmer in his final days, I paid a visit to their home.

We gathered in their living room to share the sacrament, Elma, Carrie and I, circling Elmer in his bed, and as I held out the cup Elma took her finger, dipped it in the wine, and traced it on Elmer's lips…
"The blood of Christ shed for you."

Part of Elma's legacy to us was trusting that, however her life was going any given week, she would be met at this Table by a loving and forgiving Lord who would ground her once more in this holy community, and send her back to her life a bit more whole.

And our dear brother AL. He really GOT IT, didn't he? He got life, got love, got grace. And he loved passing it on.

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Al had certain phrases he uttered again and again. Maybe you remember some of them.

- GRACIOUS LIVING, he'd say.
- And…IT'S ALL BLESSING!
- And my favorite, I AM AMAZED.

Al had a deep understanding of what it meant to be blessed. As a child during the depression, he was taken under the wing of two families who looked after him and taught him what it meant to belong. In a time known for its scarcity he learned what a difference generosity could make & he never forgot it.

I AM AMAZED, he would say. I AM AMAZED.

When Al would come in that door, a walking stick in each hand, flash that crooked smile of his, and take up his position in one of the chairs, he'd let every person who came in the door after him know that this was a community they were stepping into; a community whose spirit was alive and well.

As he prepared to cross over Jordan, there was no fear. His heart was full of gratitude.

Most of you didn't know KATHRYN as well as I did, because she was unable to leave her home for some years before her life ended last summer.

She was well along in her battle with Parkinson's when I first met her. But she just wouldn't allow her physical limitations to prevent her from serving others.

In spite of her physical challenges, each time I saw her in those early years, she'd have something waiting for me—cookies she'd baked, muffins, or candy.

THIS WOMAN IS BUILT FOR GIVING, I thought, and indeed she was.

It was always Christmas in Kathryn's house, the season of Immanuel – when God built a bridge from heaven to earth and entered our messiness as a vulnerable child in a family seeking refuge.

Welcoming hospitality was a value God planted deeply in Kathryn.

At one point, when she was still able bodied, she cared for her husband Harry as he was dying from cancer, while at the same time caring for her sister Nadellia who struggled with Alzheimer's.
One was in the bedroom and the other on the couch, and back and forth she would go, tending to their needs.

"And when they rested," she said, "I'd go out and plant tulips."

Go by her house next February and there those tulips will be there, poking their heads up—a testimony to love incarnate.

Love the Lord with all your heart, says Jesus, and love your neighbor as yourself.
Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that Kathryn or Al or Elma always got it right. They didn't. None of us do.

But the spirit of love and welcome they received from God's hand rooted deeply in them, just as they were. And now it's part of their legacy to us…just as we are.

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Margaret Silf writes:

> God comes to us not where we should have been if we had made all the right choices in life;
> not where we could have been if we had taken every opportunity that God has offered us;
> not where we wish we were if we didn't have to be in the place where we find ourselves;
> not where we think we are because our minds are out of sync with our hearts;
> not where other people think we are or think we ought to be when they are attending to their own agendas. God meets us where we really are.[1]

In her book, Traveling Mercies, Anne Lamott shares her long struggle to apprehend this God of grace. The portrait she paints of herself and her family is frighteningly honest:

> "There are pictures of the people in my family," she writes, "where we look like the most awkward and desperate folk you ever saw, poster children for the human condition.
> But I like that—when who we are shows. Everything is usually so masked or perfumed or disguised in the world, and it's so touching when you get to see something real and human.
> I think that's why most of us stay close to our families, no matter how neurotic the members, how deeply annoying or dull—because when people have seen you at your worst, you don't have to put on the mask as much. And that gives us license to try on that radical hat of liberation, the hat of self-acceptance."[2]

She's describing her family, but she might as well be describing the body of Christ as God intends us to be: A community that doesn't need to hide itself. A community that is a "training ground" for love and forgiveness.

Being saints isn't about attaining perfection. And it isn't about having the answers to life's perpetual questions.

It's about knowing who were are, and whose we are, and that we, like all God's saints, have been called through the waters into a community of love.

A community inspired by the Spirit to bear the gospel treasure in the clay jars of our lives.

Amen.

[1] Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality.* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1998)
[2] Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies, p.215.*