

Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-9  
Revelation 7: 9-17  
John 6: 35-40

The Beauty of the Glimpsed Moment  
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For the last few months, I have had a project: making up DVDs of family photos. Last June, my sisters and I went through boxes of old photos, most of which I had from my mother when she died 11 years ago. We sorted them into 2 groups: one of my mother's side of the family and one of my father's side. The idea is to make DVD copies of all these to share with cousins and nephews and nieces.

We sometimes use the word "snapshot" to describe an informal, brief summary or profile of someone or something. A quick glimpse, so to speak. As I go through these photos, most of which were taken before I was born, I see what poet Joy Mead describes as "the beauty of the glimpsed moment ... a precious jewel held for a short time amid the pain and sorrow of the world, then let go into the bigger picture." I see my uncle as a 4-year-old hugging one of his father's dogs. I see my grandparents laughing as my Grandmother reaches up to straighten my Grandfather's tie. I see my parents on their wedding day, beaming at the camera and looking very, very young. I see my brother and I at 3 and 4 years old in front of a garden, squinting at the camera. All of these people, except me, are gone. Gone, but represented in the snapshots. Gone, but represented in my mind and my heart and my life.

Today is All Souls Day, also known as the Commemoration of All Faithful Departed, or in Latin American countries, the Day of the Dead. There are many beliefs and rituals associated with this day, some of which seem superstitious, some oddly light-hearted, some downright gloomy. In our culture, the focus has shifted from religious observance to an almost obsessive secular celebration of Halloween. The National Retail Federation has gleefully announced: "Halloween will be celebrated in record numbers in 2014, with more than two-thirds of Americans buying Halloween costumes this year. Total spending for the holiday on costumes, decorations, candy and more is estimated at \$7.4 billion." That's billion, with a "b." I, for one, have felt saturated with Halloween mania for several weeks now, so I turn, almost gratefully, with a sigh of relief, to the contemplation of All Saints Day yesterday, and All Souls Day today.

So what's the difference, you might ask, between All Saints Day and All Souls Day? (And, you might also ask: since this is a congregational church in the tradition of the great reformers like Calvin, why are we talking about these "Catholic" feast days?) All Saints Day was established around the year 600 as an opportunity for us to remember all saints and martyrs, known and unknown, throughout Christian history. Around the year 1000, a French abbot designated the day after All Saints as a time to remember and pray for **all** those who have died. In our Protestant tradition, we have a slightly different take on these 2 holidays. Saints are not just those who have been canonized, but all those souls of "the righteous that are in the hand of God" as our reading from the Wisdom literature says. The late William Stringfellow described saints as "those men and women who relish the event of life as a gift and who realize that the only way to honor such a gift is to give it away." So we have a somewhat broader definition of "saint." Then, today, we do not commemorate all of the faithful departed because we think they need our help to get to heaven.

Rather, I believe, we remember and pray for them because of our own faith, and our own needs. In remembering, we hope to catch the beauty of the glimpsed moment, and be sustained by that beauty.

And so we read from our Scripture, and find words of enigmatic beauty there: a sort of poetry of consolation and hope. I could try to analyze what is there, and try to make rational sense of the readings. I could go into detail about when and why they were written, about differing beliefs in the afterlife, and images of white robes and blood and Lambs on thrones. But today, thinking about All Souls, I would just like to allow certain phrases to wash over us and enlighten us. I encourage you to listen with the ears of the heart to: “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. ....In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble....He will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes....anyone who comes to me I will never drive away...” and perhaps most enigmatic of all, “I am the bread of life.”

The fact is, it is hard to be rational and sensible about All Souls Day, just as it is hard to be rational when sorting old snapshots. Luckily, the church is a place for us to gather when everything does not fit into neat boxes of understanding. We recognize the fleeting nature of our physical lives, and at the same time the power that the past has for us. All Souls is the reminder of the gift and beauty of life to those who still mourn. It is a reminder that all souls are precious to God – not just the ones who achieve great recognition, or the ones who are like us, or think like us or act like us. Not some of the souls, but all – even those we found difficult in life. This is not picturing the deceased as some perfect icon without blemish – we recognize our complex relationship with our memories. But we also catch a glimpse of an ultimate union.

When we feel strongly about someone, strange things pop up as reminders. When I start to type in an address in my e-mail, and type in k-a, Katy Gerke’s name comes in by autofill. The same thing happens when I type in f-r and get Fran Nye. For a couple of years, I would call Merle Linnell and get Bob’s voice on the answering machine. He had died, but she left his voice recording there, welcoming those who called. A mother’s handwriting on a recipe card. A father’s doodle in the margin of a letter. These brief glimpses remind us of a larger legacy: gifts of love that we want to pass on. All Souls is the church’s way of gathering up our snapshots, pictures, email addresses with no one on the other end, voices on our home answering machines, and holding these precious loved ones together. All Souls also gives us the liturgical equivalent of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, when we recognize that some have died without the specific memory of a certain loved one. And All Souls worship in a church gives us the spiritual space we need to forgive the departed when we cannot forget old wounds.

But our faith does not allow us to dwell in a somber past, to live in eternal mourning. There is more than a nostalgic beauty in that glimpsed moment. There is bread for new life. There are seeds for the future. There is the energy of love. In her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker writes: “And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see -- like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.” Our worship today should send us out with a creative spark, and with seeds to plant.

In his journal of the year following his wife’s death, [A Grief Observed](#), C. S. Lewis wrote “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.” On All Souls Day, we do not remain in grieving,

and we allow our words of Scripture to banish fear. We are remembering. Remembrance is different – faithful remembrance feels so like gratitude.

Some of the departed have left us boxes of photographs, some have left us other legacies, both painful and joyful. We cling to some of these things and try to bury others. Today, please hear our Scriptures. In the words of Laura Everett, the executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, “You do not have to end your weeping, but know that God desires to wipe away every tear. You do not have to have the strength to say the names of your dead today, but know that the Lord knows and cares for all souls. You do not have to have the taste of heaven on your lips today, but you are invited to eat the bread of heaven.” Amen.