

## Remembrance Sunday 2016

Rev. Alida Ward

### *Here We Find Comfort*

Twenty years ago, when I had been at this church for 7 years,  
I decided I wanted to go back to school.

I missed it -- I missed reading and thinking and being challenged,  
and I felt like my brain was getting mushy.

So I applied to Princeton Seminary, and they accepted me in their Doctorate of  
Ministry program,

and this church was kind enough to put up with me disappearing down to New  
Jersey periodically as I worked to de-mushify my brain.

And in 1999, a whole bunch of church families showed even greater kindness  
as they agreed to be the subjects of my thesis,

to let me sit down with them, cassette tape recorder in hand,  
and interview them.

And what I wanted to talk about was the journey back to church --

I wanted to find out what it was about becoming parents that makes so many  
people say "whoa, it's time to find a church to go to."

So I sat in twenty living rooms

with moms and dads pretty much like me -- my kids were 5 and 7.

And I had my list of questions, and my legal pad, and that tape recorder.

But after a while we would forget the recorder was there,

and I'd set my questions down, and we'd just talk.

We would talk about how it felt to hold the hand of a toddler

and to want more than anything for her to always feel that someone was holding  
her hand.

We talked about watching kids laughing in the back yard

and *longing* for some way to give them a forever sense of joy and wonder.

We talked about the soul-deep instinct to protect a little one from hurt,

and how we wanted them always to feel cared for and guided.

And all of that added up to wanting their children to be in a place

where they would learn about a God who loved them and would guide them,  
where they would know joy.

One dad said, "my hope for my children is that they know that they are never alone, and that they never have anything to fear."

"My hope", said one mom, "is that they know there is a comfort to be had here."

But here was the poignant thing to me,  
as I listened, and wrote, and listened some more.

What I began to notice was that everything these parents longed for for their kids was what they actually hoped for for themselves:

what they wanted to give to their children was what they wanted someone to give to them, too:

that sense that there was a God whose deepest hope for them was joy,  
the sense that there is a Love out there more powerful than any hurt,  
that there is a Wisdom guiding our steps.

They wanted that assurance for their children, yes -- in fact, I titled my little book "to give the kids religion,"

but these parents also ached to know that they were loved and cherished.

They wanted to gift their children with faith;  
but they wanted to find it again for themselves.

And something else: when I asked them what they most *worried* about,  
I was startled by the response I heard over and over again --  
It was mortality.

It was the realization that someday their lives would end,  
and would they have gifted their children with enough faith to live through that?

It was the realization that people they loved would some day leave,  
and would they themselves have the strength of spirit to hold on.

And it was their own deep wondering and worry about life after death.

I still remember one of the dads confessing to me,  
"Alida, I am very afraid of dying.

I would really like to get to the point where I am a little more comfortable with the concept."

He spoke for many.

I keep saying "those parents" and "them,"  
but the truth is I should just be saying "you."

Because of the twenty households I spoke with, all but one have stayed put;  
all those moms and dads are in the pews, and on our Boards,  
reading scripture from that lectern,  
teaching Sunday School and leading youth groups.

Over the 17 years since I wrote my thesis,  
we have worshiped together and laughed together and fixed houses in  
Appalachia together.

We have watched children on the playing fields and in the school play;  
we have sent them off to college and commiserated.

And in these many years together in this church  
those families I spoke with have experienced the full,  
the full measure of joy and sorrow.

Loss has touched most all of those families;  
loss that tore out pieces of our hearts;  
death that we could not see coming and that knocked us sideways.

David and I have stood at gravesides together with these families;  
out at the columbarium walls in our memorial Garden;  
we have gathered in this place time and time again  
to look death in the eye together.

And here's what we have seen, David and I:  
we have seen that faith, that longed-for faith, alive in these people we love.  
We have seen that faith breathing hope into broken hearts,  
we have seen it lifting wounded spirits --  
we have seen that faith give a courage that took our breath away.  
We have seen our people affirm with their whole selves  
the sure and certain knowledge that death has no power in this place.  
We have seen our people -- you -- willing to stake your lives on this truth:

that the lives of those they loved and lost  
have not come to an end --  
that they are safe, and well, and cherished and alive  
in a place of joy beyond all our imagining.

In the Gospel of John, there is a beautiful, beautiful passage,  
which, at most every memorial service, either David or I will read.  
It's what Jesus says to his friends when he knows that he's about to leave them,  
and he knows they're worried, and he knows they're scared,  
and he knows they need just a little more faith.

And he says

"In my Father's house, there are many rooms.

And there's one for each of you.

And I'm going there ahead of you to get your place ready,  
so that one day, one day, I will come and take you with me,  
and where I am you will be also."

One big house with a whole lot of rooms.

One big welcome for everyone we have ever loved,  
and for each of us.

That one mom, seventeen years ago, said to me,  
"I hope my children will know that there is comfort to be had here."

What she's come to know, what we've all come to know together,  
is the truth of that:

that there is comfort to be had here --

the comfort of knowing we are loved in this life and beyond,

the comfort of knowing we are never alone -- in this life and beyond,

the comfort of knowing that there is a place with a whole lot of room in it where  
we all be gathered together again.

In just a moment, we share communion.

One table for everyone here, and for everyone not here.

One table at which what we call the Communion of saints becomes very real -- that great circle of love that extends from these pews into God's own heaven. One table at which, sitting right beside us, is everyone we've ever cherished, and everyone whose name we have just named.

This is the faith we hold onto.

This is the faith we've grown into -- or are growing into.

This is the faith that will comfort our children one day as it comfort us on this day.

This is God's own truth. Here we do find comfort. Amen.