

Remembrance Sunday 2020

It was a bright, crisp fall afternoon,
the sky dazzlingly blue and the leaves already glorious with color.
There were not quite twenty of us there,
which was good, because we were allowed no more than 25.
The folding chairs were carefully arranged six feet apart,
spaced out across the lawn
in front of the chapel at the Mount Auburn Cemetery
in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
We were there, our small group,
to say goodbye to my uncle,
a wonderful uncle, a loved father, a cherished grandfather.

When my aunt had died, years and years ago,
we had filled a church for her --
neighbors and co-workers,
friends who had known her as a young girl,
extended family from all over.
But we couldn't do that for my uncle, of course --
couldn't pack a church,
couldn't gather in dozens and dozens of people who had known
him for years
or lived next door
or worked with him.

It was just us, not quite twenty,
as I led the service outside the chapel of the Mount Auburn
Cemetery.

Most all the names that I'll read to you in a moment

are the names of those who, like my uncle,
have left us since the pandemic began.
So most of all these whom we will remember
were grieved for and honored by small gatherings of family,
standing by gravesides,
or out in the Memorial Garden,
or in just a few front pews of this church.
We did not, could not,
bring together all those who could tell the stories from the past,
reminiscences of work life together,
tales of their childhood,
or that funny time on vacation
or the time
We could not gather everyone who knew this person.

But it was okay.
It **is** okay.
Because in those moments of farewell,
we were placing the person we cherished into the hands of the
One who already *knew* all those stories.
We were placing the ones we loved into the hands of the One who
knew them best,
better than any one of us could know.
We lifted my Uncle Carl into the waiting arms of the One
who had been there at his birth
who had held his hand through childhood,
who had led him through each choice and change
and who had surrounded him with peace as he left this place.

When I need to remember this --
when I need to remember this God who knows us,

Psalm 139 is my assurance.

It goes like this:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from far away.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

O Lord, you know it completely.

Where could I ever go from your spirit?

Where could I ever flee from your presence?

If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

For it was you who formed me,

you who knit me together --

and I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

We are known, truly known and understood

by the One who created us,

who knit us together so that we are wonderfully made.

We are known, truly known,

by the one who knows our thoughts,

who hears our words even before we've spoken them.

We are not only known,

but we are accompanied, in every moment,

by a Love that will not let us go.

And we are welcomed into eternity

by that same Love.

In our small gatherings of grief and farewell,

sometimes only 3 or 4 of us,

sometimes just a dozen,
this has been our profound comfort:

That the one to whom we were saying goodbye
was cherished by each of us,
known and loved by each of us.
That we placed them with tenderness and trust
into the hands of One who loved them more than we could
imagine,
and who knew them, truly knew them
beyond even the knowing of those to whom they were dearest.
That we were giving them
to the one who created them,
who called them by name on the day of their birth,
who led them by the hand on every day that followed
and who held them close on their last day.

And so, in the end,
it didn't matter whether we could surround them with our
memories,
fill a church sanctuary with our stories.
In the end, these whom we loved
were held by the one who knew already all there was to be
remembered
and every story that had been told.
O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
Where could I ever go from your presence?

In just a moment I will name aloud the names of the ones we have
loved
who have left us since last we marked All Saints' Day.

Those who were loved and cherished,
who mattered, and are missed.
Their lives were filled with stories,
stories that you, perhaps, were a part of.
And I name them today
in the presence of the God who could *tell* each of those stories,
those we knew and were a part of,
those we don't.
For the God we worship is the God who knows us best of all.
And who has welcomed them home.

This we know:
that these whom we knew and loved,
these dear ones in whose stories we shared:
they are safe, and cherished, and alive
in a place where they are known completely
as they have always been known.
And loved completely, as they have always been loved.

And so it is for each of us.
So it is for each one of us.
We are known. We are cherished.
And we will, one day,
be welcomed with love into that place
where the saints of our lives wait to see us again.
Amen.