

Pentecost 26, All Saints' Sunday - November 4, 2012 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

As many of you know, Rachel's father Julian died back in 2009 while he was in the process of moving to Maine to be with her. He was cremated, and his ashes have sat on our mantle-shelf ever since – the family couldn't decide what to do with them.

But finally they decided on Sunnyside cemetery in Coupeville – it overlooks Ebey's Landing and he always liked it. A headstone was purchased, and after some adventures, a date was picked: November 2nd – which is All Souls Day – celebrated more and more in our culture as El Día de los Muertos – the Day of the Dead.

It seemed like a good choice! The cemetery sexton dug the hole, and we opted to be the ones to put Julian in the ground and bury him – we took all the tools necessary – and that's what we did.

Then we toasted him with his favorite Harvey's Bristol Cream sherry, pouring some on the grave at the same time. Henry, of course, did what all dogs would do: he tried to lick up the sherry!

Then we retired to the Tye – Julian's favorite place to eat – for a meal he would have been proud of! In a sense we released him from us on Friday – and he released us, too.

When people die we don't just walk away as if nothing has happened. We want to mark their passing in some significant way because they were important to us. And while we each have our own private ways of remembering, it's the community's remembrance that takes center stage. Unless you're very unfortunate – and in our increasingly secular culture there are more and more people who are very unfortunate – unless you're very unfortunate the community will want to remember you.

In the Anglican tradition we tend not to separate All Saints and All Souls days – and while we call today “All Saints' Sunday” we're really combining the two.

In part that's because when we say “All Saints” we're thinking mostly about those who have gone before, who have “fought the good fight...finished the race...kept the faith” (2 Tim 4:7). Not those we're lost, but those we're released into God's good care.

We renew our baptismal vows today because these vows connect us to all those saints, all those souls who have gone before – in doing so we become one community, celebrating each other's faith as we celebrate those who went before us.

And “we” and “us” are important words here – there's really no “I” when it comes to faith, only “we”.

That, I think, is what lies at the heart of today's gospel – no “I” only “we”.

On face value this is a straightforward story – and it begins tragically. Lazarus is dead. Mary's lament “if you had been here he would not have died” is right on; not scolding but appropriate, as

is her clear doubt in response to Jesus' words. And Jesus' initial response – clearly he was crying – is powerful too. Lament, we're being told, is an appropriate response to death. We do really badly when it comes to lament in our culture – we're allowed a few weeks of mourning but then we're expected to "get over it"! Most studies say that it takes about seven years to fully incorporate the meaning of the death of someone we love – that's a little bit more than two weeks!

In the telling of this story, and especially in Jesus' tears at his friend's death, John is seeking to share with us a powerful message: that God cries with us when we mourn.

But there's another side to this story – the second half, if you will. Looking deeper into that second half – beyond the mighty act of God – there's a powerful metaphor here that's easily missed, and it comes in the very last phrase: "unbind him and let him go".

God raises, but, Jesus says, the community has to unbind Lazarus or he dies again. We're not just onlookers – we have a great responsibility to be a part of the unbinding that God's grace unleashes, which means at the very least that we who have been baptized are partners with God in the unbinding of our fellow human beings from all the experiences of suffering and death that so fill our world. That's a profound and humbling calling, and it belongs to every one of us without exception.

One of my seminary classmates – now a highly respected priest of some 30 years – was, in her youth, a drug dealer who probably would have been dead by 30 if she hadn't been invited by an acquaintance to her local Episcopal Church. That was, for her, an experience of unbinding, of being set free.

So I think that today's invitation to us (and it is an invitation to **us** as a community of faith rather than as individuals) is to project back our desire to honor those we love who have died and do the same to those still living among us – to do the same to every human being – honor them, support them, "unbind [them] and set [them] free". We will be a part of God's resurrection for all humanity if we do this.