"Acquainted With the Night"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 21, 2012

In the last couple of weeks, something shifted. Have you noticed? We've moved from early fall, with its crisp, sunny, blue-sky days, across some invisible line into late fall, with colder weather and more of those dark, rainy days. It's noticeably darker now in the morning, and the sun is setting earlier each day. Ready or not, winter is coming.

Next Sunday brings our annual All Souls service, when we remember those who have died. We place a big table up front here, and ask you to bring photographs and other mementos of your loved ones who have died, so we can make a shrine here. We light candles and invite you to speak aloud their names. We re-member them, we bring the dead back into our midst by these rituals. It's one of my favorite services of the year.

It's no accident that we have our All Souls service at this time of year. There's a long tradition of people acknowledging the nearness of death as the days grow shorter. In Mexico it's the Day of the Dead, in Pagan traditions it's Samhein, halfway between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice. The word Halloween is short for "all hallow's eve." November 1st is All Hallow's Day or All Saint's Day, a day in the church to remember those who have died. In Celtic Christianity, people believe there are times in the year when the boundary between the physical world and the spirit world is especially thin. This is one of those times. The invitation is to be open to what we tend to shy away from, the shadow side of life, the fact that being alive means also having to die.

In earlier times people were more closely acquainted with death. People killed the meat that they themselves ate, and there were fewer medicines and procedures to keep people alive, so death was a more constant companion. Death was understood as a part of life.

Nowadays, we seem to want to push death away. Except on TV, where we see people, thankfully most of them fictional characters, dying all the time. But we live in a culture that is less comfortable with death than the one our grandparents knew. There are some hopeful things in our day, like hospice, which helps people to accept death, to make choice that will help them to have a good death. But we do live in a death-denying culture.

There's a poem that sometimes gets used at funerals. It begins, "Do not stand at my grave and weep. I am not there. I do not sleep." It goes on to describe the spirit of the person as being in

the wind that blows, and in the sun that shines. The poem ends, “Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die.”

I don’t like this poem. I understand and appreciate its assertion that the spirit of the person is near, and can be sensed in the world around us. But I don’t like that it tells mourners not to cry. Anyone who has lost a loved one to death needs to grieve, needs to let the tears come. I don’t like how it denies the stark reality of death, and the pain and loss that death brings. At a funeral someone has died, and we need to tell the truth about that.

Last night I flew back from California where on Friday I co-officiated, with a Zen Buddhist priest, at the memorial service for my friend and fishing buddy Don. There were plenty of tears at that service for a dear man who died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack. I shed some of my own, and it was good to grieve.

Traveling out there on Thursday, especially on the drive up to Sonoma County where he lived, I became aware of a sense of dread in my heart. I didn’t want to arrive. Because when I did, I’d have to face the reality that he had died. When his widow hugged me for a long time, when I saw his children in their grief, then his death became very real. When some of them thanked me for coming, I didn’t know how to respond. “I couldn’t not come,” I said.

I am as good as anyone at trying to push death away. I don’t want to admit that this good life is so impermanent. There is so much of it to soak up! When fishing, my mantra is always, “Just one more cast. Just one more cast.” But the days grow shorter, the season comes to an end, and I wonder to myself, “How many more of these do I get?”

Don met me in Montana two summers ago, and we fished together for four days. We ate steaks and drank martinis and had long conversations about everything. When the fishing was slow, he was the more patient one. He seemed content to just be there in that big and beautiful country, under that big sky. When our time was over, we said we’d definitely do it again. But that was the last time.

One day, when I was in divinity school, a professor was leading a discussion of some arcane aspect of Biblical interpretation. At some point she paused, and looked at us, and said, “Of course, you’ll spend a lot more time marrying people and burying people than you will thinking about things like this.” She was right, and it’s a privilege to be with you in these key moments of joy and sorrow.

In my work, I get to be with people who are dying, and with the family and friends who are left behind. Some of you, especially nurses and other care providers, you have a familiarity with death, don’t you? And those of you of a certain age, who see your friends dying and yourself aging, you must think about death too. Would you agree that an awareness of death, others and your own, is not morbid, and can make life sweeter and more precious?

I’m not trying to romanticize this. I just think it’s good for us, no matter how young or old, to do what we can to be prepared for the losses this life will bring. It’s never too soon to start living the

life you want to live, or mending the relationships you'd like to fix, or saying the things you need to say. It's good for us to become familiar with the impermanence of life and our own mortality. I hope this opens us up, softens us, not hardens us.

I invite you to take some tangible steps toward acknowledging your own mortality. Think about your own memorial service, and what hymns you'd like us to sing, and readings that are meaningful to you. Make a time to come and talk with me about this. Consider writing your own obituary--not for publication, but just for the experience of contemplating your own life. What might you say about yourself? And are there things you need to get started on, so they will be included in your obituary?

Robert Frost wrote a poem called, "Acquainted With the Night." It begins

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain -- and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.
I have looked down the saddest city lane.

His words are resonating with me these days. I hear that poem as an invitation to be in touch with this darkening season and with our own mortality. I'm not saying this is easy. But the invitation is to be, like the poet, acquainted with the night; to have the willingness and the courage to walk out in solitude, and face the reality of this life; that it is made up of light and shadow, joy and sorrow, and you don't get one without the other.

The truth is, the night is not as dark as it sometimes seems. Your eyes adjust, and you can see a surprising number of things in the dark. You can see things, like the stars, that are hidden during the day.

Likewise, death clarifies things. Smaller, more inconsequential matters fall away in the face of death. And the fact that our lives don't last forever can make us aware that our days are precious and life, even with its struggles, is sweet. Mary Oliver puts it so beautifully:

I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

I hope you see yourself that way--a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth.

Next Sunday we will remember those who have died. I invite you to think about them this week, and gather up those pictures and mementos that you want to bring to our observance of All Souls. I invite you to consider your own mortality in these darkening days.

John O'Donohue rightly names that contemplating your own death helps you to give up trying to control what you can't control, and can help you to see death as not as something to be feared, but as an invitation to freedom. "If you really live your life to the full," he said, "death will never have power over you. It will never seem like a destructive, negative event. It can become, for you, the moment of release into the deepest treasures of your own nature; it can be your full entry into the temple of your soul. If you are able let go of things, you learn to die spiritually in little ways during your life. When you learn to let go of things, a greater generosity, openness, and breath comes into your life."[1]

This time of year, as the leaves are letting go of their hold on the branches that held them through the spring and summer, as our end of the earth is tilting away from the sun, is a time for letting go. Life is impermanent. As the hymn says, "the letter fails, the systems fall, and every symbol wanes."

But that's not the whole story, or how the hymn ends. It says, "the Spirit overseeing all, eternal love, remains."[2]

That is our Universalist faith, in the God whose other name is Love. In that all-encompassing Love in which nobody is left behind, and the living are connected to the dead.

In these darkening days, and in the face of our own mortality, let us be faithful and hopeful sojourners on this good earth; in touch with the beauty and fragility of life, acquainted with the night, and assured of that Love which will not ever let us go.

Amen.

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[1] John O'Donohue, Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom.

[2] Immortal Love, #10 in Singing the LIving Tradition, words by John Greenleaf Whittier.