

“TOGETHER IN SPIRIT... IN GRIEF AND IN JOY”

I Corinthians 12:12-26

November 1, 2020

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I am thinking about Sally today, one of our saints who died in the last year. I remember when she and her husband first came to Westminster. They'd sit on my left about half way back in the outside two seats. She would talk about this dear neighbor who happened to be a colleague of mine, who would see that Don and Sally had everything they needed. We both experienced Kevin as this gentle, kind, giant. I remember the disappointment when Kevin and his wife moved away, the sorrow when Don and Sally had to leave their home, the relative suddenness of Don's passing, and then Sally having to move into a memory care unit.

Sally didn't join any groups. They came on Sundays and stayed for potlucks, got to know the people who sat around them. Many of you may not remember Sally, but we prayed for her most weeks. We shared in her sorrows, and we rejoiced in her delights. What a privilege it was for me to hear stories of her service as a nurse during the war, and of the great joy she took in her children and grandchildren.

It wasn't long after Sally died that Walter passed away after a lengthy struggle with Alzheimer's. He sat behind me contributing his nice bass voice to the choir. If you visited him, you heard about his escape from the Nazis and immigration to the US, his service delivering mail during the Korean War that would eventually lead him to citizenship in this country. It was difficult to watch his slow decline, but we prayed for him most weeks as well, and felt our spirits uplifted by his never-failing love for music and the old hymns.

Agnes came to us probably after the prime of her life, but her child-like personality blessed us all. What a delight we all experienced as she sat next to Marie playing the bell tree during the special seasons of the church year; never seeming to miss a note and adding flourishes that would bring smiles to our faces. We prayed for her too.

The first thing Paul asked us when we came to Westminster was about what we liked to drink, and every so often a bottle of wine discretely wrapped in a paper bag would show up on our desk. He believed in contributing to the minister's well-being. Over the years we have prayed for more of Paul's relatives than any other member of the church, but he never failed to ask me how I was doing. He served this church as an elder and a deacon and a variety of other ways, but it was always about the church as a community of faith for him. My heart ached for him as he suffered one health problem after another. And we prayed for him in every one of those.

Jackie and I bonded over a shared political perspective, but there was much more to Jackie than that. I learned from her that one could be connected to the church without showing up for worship. When her health kept from being involved, she'd read the newsletter and talk to friends on the phone. When I visited, she'd want to know some detail about what the church was doing that didn't make it to the newsletter. It mattered

to her what the church was doing even when she couldn't be here. Besides all that, she loved poetry.

Marilyn never came to church. When she moved into an assisted living place, her daughter called and asked if someone could take communion to her. She was a staunch Presbyterian and the sacrament was very important to her. There was never any question that we would do so, never any question that we would be her pastors and her church community.

Dee was never actually a member of this church, but I don't think many people knew that. She shared with us her love of gardening. Her refusal to look her age made us all feel a little younger. We prayed for her as well, but not as much because most of her 100 years of life were pretty healthy.

Together, we mourn the loss of these saints from our church community during this last year. This day, especially, we come together in grief for our losses; but we also come together in joy for the many ways these saints have blessed this community through the years.

Paul spends a lot of words describing the many ways in which members of the church differ from one another and why this is so important for the health and future of the church. We can see this truth in the lives of those we miss today. They are each so different, and yet in their differences, they all blessed the church. But we only see this as we live out the truth of verses 25 and 26. "the members have the same care for one another. If one member suffers all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

In these days, we are more aware of our losses, but also of those things that brought and bring us joy. We are more aware of the things that hold us together as a community of faith. Now, more than ever, we need to come together around our sorrows and our joys. These are the things that bind us together, that demonstrate our love for one another.

These things are important not only for the church, but for the world as well. 2020 has been a difficult year. The world has experienced loss far more tragic than our own. Most of those we have lost lived very long and blessed lives. The pandemic has cut short so many lives. Like the racism that we have become more aware of, it has touched minorities and the poor at a much higher rate. If you haven't voted yet, I pray that you will, and not just because leadership matters in hard times, but because good leadership helps us see the hope and draws us forth to the joy yet to come. I feel privileged to be part of a faith community that sees the pain and welfare of the world as its own.

But this day, in which we remember not only the absence we feel at the losses we've experienced in this faith community, we also remember the great blessings we have received over the years. This is a large part of what it means to be church: to suffer and to rejoice with one another. This day we gather in grief and joy as the body of Christ. Thanks be to God, whose love never fails, and makes us one in our love and care for one another and the world. Amen.