

Grieve with Abandonment... but Not Without Hope
All Saints Sunday, November 5, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

Jim sighed, rolled his eyes, and smiled kind of a goofy smile.

It was the kind of smile that said, with the long-suffering humor that only a lifetime Chicago Cubs fan could muster:

“How did I get myself into this?”

It was 30 years ago, Jim was the rector of [Calvary Episcopal Church, Columbia, MO](#), and I was fresh out of college, working part-time as a sportswriter and full-time doing campus ministry at the church.

But Jim was more than just my boss.

Jim was the dad I never had.

Now I love my dad. Many of you met my dad before he died this spring, and seriously, what's not to love? Sweetest, kindest man you could ever meet. Brilliant scientist with a heart of gold and a cute British accent.

And ... there was always a distance between us that neither of us could seem to bridge. We loved each other – no doubt about that. And yet we were always just this slightly missed connection. It's nobody's fault. I find fault to be sincerely overrated.

Some of you know the story of how he grew up in England and his older brother, Jack, whom he adored, was piloting an RAF bomber over Germany in December, 1944, when he was shot down and killed, and his parents literally shut the door to Jack's room and never talked about it. Not to my dad or to anyone.

I used to say that it's Hitler's fault why I couldn't change a tire or fix anything around the house. In those days those skills were largely handed down from father to son ... and that chain broke when Jack was killed. And my dad learned to survive on his own, which tends to not make you that forthcoming in relationship. And pair that with my mom who grew up in China Lake, a naval secret city in the middle of the Mojave Desert, and we were the very model of the non-communicative family. I literally found out my brother had been charged, gone to court and sentenced to community service for a high school prank two days after the sentencing when one of his friends asked me how the court date went, and I had no idea what she was talking about.

Needless to say, we were not the poster family for communications skills or showing affection. And so while they loved me and gave me so much, unconsciously I looked for surrogate parents that could give me what they couldn't. Because that's what we do. There was Pat Huls, one of my youth leaders in high school. "Mom Pat" we called her. There was [Nancie Greenstein](#), my high school journalism teacher who was maybe the first teacher I ever had who talked to me like an actual person. And then, when I went away to college, there was Jim Fallis.

I loved the dad I had, but Jim was the dad I never had. And so hungry for that relationship, I would hang out in Jim's office at Calvary Church a lot – the way I could never hang out with my dad as a child -- and he indulged me with loving conversation like this one day where we were sitting at the table in his office, and he was opening his mail.

It was from a cemetery in Indianapolis (or "Indian -noplacé" as Jim liked to call it), where his first wife, Beverly, was buried and where he had a plot next to hers, and where the letter he had in his hand said that he now owned a plot for his current wife, Judy, on the other side of his plot.

I asked Jim what he was holding, and he painted the picture for me. Beverly on one side, Judy on the other and him in the middle – right smack between wife number one and wife number two.

And he sighed, rolled his eyes, and smiled his goofy smile. Imagining the complexities of an eternity of balancing the relationships between these two women he had loved and still loved so deeply.

We didn't say any more to each other. What was there to say?

For all the certainty with which particularly Christians can talk about what happens after we die, the truth is it is the ultimate act of faith and conjecture. None of us knows. And in a world where we worship certainty and being in control, that is an inconvenient truth to say the least.

And so, we construct theologies and images and speak about what happens after we die with a vehemence and certainty that belies and soothes the unspoken truth of our profound uncertainty and fear.

For most of my life, I have found those theologies and images lacking. Frankly, they all, as my friend, Rand, says, look and sound way too much like a retirement villa in Coral Gables ... and not surprising because they come out of a culture that values property rights over everything else and where our building blocks for these images are only what we know.

Now my mom's church, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#), held onto the idea of reincarnation ... you keep getting born and reborn until you have worked through everything you need to work through and achieve union with the divine. This actually made more sense to me than the typical line I had been fed in Christian churches because at least it dealt with my problem that

even if you live for 120 years that's just a blip on the cosmic calendar and it seems really odd that based on what you did for that relative nanosecond of human existence you would be granted heaven or sentenced to hell for all eternity.

In fact, heaven and hell has never worked for me. That has always sounded much more like humans trying to control each other with mythology rather than a theology that fit into an infinite universe.

The truth is, in the intellectual sense, we don't KNOW anything about what happens after we die. And yet that doesn't mean we don't know anything.

Our hearts, our spirits, know plenty.

We know that there are people whom we have shared life with ... from brief moments to decades ... who have become such a part of us that it is impossible for us to imagine they are no longer alive in some form because that part of us that yearns for them is so real and deep, because they are still alive in our hearts and we can feel their absence so deeply and painfully.

The Gospel reading we just heard is beautiful in its agony. Because this is what it feels like when someone we love dies. It feels like a veil being torn in two. Like a shaking of all the foundations of our lives and life itself. As grounded as we try to be in what we can control, this ultimate thing we cannot control can undo us.

And so, we fill the cloud of unknowing with words that are frankly not only cold comfort but really problematic theology, much of which usually made me want to go 10 rounds with God without gloves.

"She's in a better place?" ... OK, well if that's true then why don't we all just go there together and get it over with. Oh ... but that's a sin and we'll go to hell? So, we just have to endure life until we are lucky enough to die? And you also say that life is good and a gift?

Then there's "There's a reason for everything. God has a plan." Well, I'm sorry but if God's plan involves three year olds dying of cancer and families being blown up by artillery fire, or Jim having a massive stroke while he was pulling out of a restaurant parking lot and lingering for several days before he died, then maybe it's time for God to go back to the drawing board ... or at least get some anger management counseling.

And my personal least favorite, "God needed another angel" ... well, thanks, God, but he was the one person I had. What about what I needed?

And what about the relationships?

All of these relationships were imperfect. And when they died there were things left unsaid and wounds unnamed and untended. And we grieve not only what we have lost but the healing that

either never had a chance to happen or somehow never could happen.

And, like Jim, there's the fact that we can love multiple people deeply and intimately – as he did Beverly and Judy -- while we think that should be comforting and worthy of rejoicing in ... doesn't translate well into a view of the afterlife that we have constructed in our own image, where the church and state have – largely for reasons of controlling people and property – maintained that you can only be in an intimate relationship with one person.

Not only do I not find most of the church's traditional theology about death and the afterlife particularly comforting, I've gotta say for me it just doesn't pass the sniff test. I'm not saying I know what happens after we die, in fact I'm pretty clear that I don't trust it when people say with certainty that they do. And while I have as great deal of sympathy for our human need to have some control over this ultimate reality, I just can't get behind the unquestioning fealty the church too often demands behind the theology we have constructed to fill that need. Especially when for me it just doesn't hold together.

So where does that leave us? In the realm of mystery and wondering and trust. Where something in me just deeply trusts that what makes us each us – our basic essence -- is so beautiful and powerful it cannot just die ... and deeply wonders what in the world that looks like.

When my mother was dying, I kept vigil in her hospice room overnight while she slept in the bed and my dad slept in the chair next to her holding her hand. One of those nights, I couldn't sleep and I couldn't cry and more than anything I just didn't know. I had dealt with death before ... lots of times ... but not like this.

My mom and I had a complicated relationship – kind of like with my dad we had never really connected. But just before COVID there had been a conversation that had felt like a breakthrough ... something we could build on in the years ahead.

Only the next time I saw her, she was on her deathbed. There would be no years ahead.

It wasn't that I wasn't sad about my mom dying, but what was really tearing me in two was that after 50-plus years it felt like we were just on the edge of healing and wholeness in our relationship ... and then ... Nope. Sorry. Time's up. And it just wasn't fair. And none of the traditional Christian theology that had been fed to me about death and heaven and hell was making any sense at all.

So, at about 3 in the morning, as my mother's shallow breathing and my dad's snoring filled her hospice room, I pulled out my phone and my Air pods, and re-watched the series finale of The Good Place. Without getting into it, -- and OK ... spoilers ... the Good Place was a brilliant half-hour comedy that explored theology and philosophy from the vantage point of a group of people who had died and gone to "the good place" ... or heaven. And they ultimately find heaven in all its perfection, boring ... and one by one they choose to enter into this unknown

light where they became one with the universe. A very Buddhist take on death and dying.

And as I watched it in the darkness of that hospice room, I had this amazing feeling of peace and calm that no theological construct had ever brought me. I was able to let my mom go into the universe, and it was OK.

Somehow the idea of a disappearing of individual consciousness didn't mean death. I couldn't explain it, but I was able to trust it.

A few months ago, I was reading [Michael Pollan's book *How to Change Your Mind*](#): What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence.

Ok, stay with me here ... this is an example of how you might not like my preaching or agree with me, but I pretty much promise you it won't be boring.

Pollan writes about his own and others' experiences with certain psychedelics like LSD, mushrooms and other substances. And an experience he relates both personally and from others is that of losing a sense of ego and personal identity but maintaining a sense of consciousness. Of basically being one with the universe.

At this point, I need to assure you there will be nothing unusual in the communion bread and wine this morning ... I swear.

And ... as I was reading this, I flashed back (perhaps that's an appropriate term) to my mother's hospice room and the comfort I had from that series finale of *The Good Place*. That these are people whose experience is saying it is possible to have a conscious experience that is not bounded by personal identity ... and yet still be conscious with a different sense of self.

That there is the ability to continue to exist in different forms of consciousness.

And I thought about my mom and my dad ... and all the unfinished business of relationship between us that still remained when they died.

And I thought about Jim and his eyes rolling as he imagined an eternity lying between Beverly and Judy.

And I thought about all the relationships all of us have had – pretty much every relationship that has ever been – where the grief is compounded by the things that never got said and the wounds that never got healed.

And I thought ... there can be healing. It's possible. And we don't have to imagine it happening in some heavenly therapy session (which, frankly, seems like a contradiction in terms), but merely that when our bodies die those barriers to healing simply fall away. All love becomes

non-possessive. There is just love, and joy, and wholeness.

Now I'm not saying, "this is what happens when we die." But I wonder if it might be ... or something like it. Where we are able to be fully present with each other and the whole universe and all the barriers between us -- even our own ego state barriers -- fall away.

Where we can love without possessiveness. Give freely without fear. Rejoice without ceasing, and where every wound is healed.

And then I think about Jesus' prayer that God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. And it gives me hope not just that someday these relationships that ended not fully whole can be healed and we can continue to grow in love and healing together ... but that also we can strive to achieve that here.

To be a community like the first followers of Jesus who fearlessly shared all things in common and gave to each as had need.

Who recognize that there is enough love for everyone and that we can aspire to and actually achieve relationships of non-possessive love with one another -- to rejoice in and not fear safe, loving intimacy wherever we or others can find it.

To be a community where we can hold each other in our grief and tears for as long anyone needs because we are comfortable enough with our own grief and tears that we don't try to shut each other down out of fear of the same feelings in ourselves.

Russian poet [Osip Mandelshtam](#) sings:

Of thy form, tormenting and unsteady
I could not catch hold within the fog.
"Lord!" I uttered accidentally,
Not myself intending to say so

God's name, like a large bird unfurling
From out of my breast took flight
Ahead of me -- dense fog is curling
And an empty cage is left behind.

Maybe that is the journey of our liberation and healing. Except instead of it being the singular of which Mandelstam sings, it is the plural. God leads us together out of the cages of all that binds us into the dense fog of unknowable, unseeable healing and love.

My father and Jim are side by side on the ofrenda this morning. The dad I had and the dad I never had. My mom and Mom Pat, as we called her, are there too.

And I trust they are not just there ... they are here. Right here. The fog is thick ... and yet I know they are there. And I love you all.

And the things unsaid, the wounds that were not yet tended, the misconnections that were never bridged ... they are not cast in stone. They are not forever unsaid, unconnected, unhealed. There is misery in the cage and healing in the fog ... and we join hands and enter it together and become whole.

For centuries unto millennia, cultures way more ancient than our Euro-American one trusted that our ancestors are among us. I'm not sure when we got too smart for that ancient indigenous wisdom, but I think it's time to chart a course toward its return. Chart a course where we hold hands and leave the cage behind and make the fog our home.

Our laws of physics tell us that nothing is lost ... ever. So how can we ever be lost from each other.

"Grieve with abandonment," [Becca Stevens](#) said when she stood in this pulpit for my installation nearly seven years ago.

"Grieve with abandonment. There is more to grieve as we get older, and it becomes deeper and richer," she said.

There is such deep wisdom there. We have so much to grieve and so few places that will hold us in love without judgment as we do. If we do nothing else, can we be that place, can we be that community. Whether it be for the people on this ofrenda or the children who are dying in Gaza or anywhere in the world.

Grieve with abandonment ... but not without hope. And if you aren't able to muster hope let this community of hope hold you and hope for you.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

We do not need to be bound by inadequate theology based on fear and the need to control ... either in this life or the next. Theology that tries to convince us that life has an end and love has limits.

Grieve with abandonment ... but not without hope.

Grieve with abandonment ... but not with fear.

Grieve with abandonment ... but never alone.

On this day and the days that follow, may we more fully become a community that does not join the world in fearing death and silencing grief ... but embracing both death and grief as the gateway to healing and wholeness.

On this day and the days that follow may we hold each other in trusting or even trying to trust that far from hiding our tears, we can shout them and scream them because though our tears are a powerful word, they will never be the last word.

On this day and the days that follow, may we be people less of comfortable certainty than we are of awe and wonder. May we find love without possessiveness and life without fear of loss. May we leave the cage behind and together dive into the fog.

May we find strength in our tears, and trust that we will hold each other and be held by each other and God until the last tear is wiped away.

Amen.