

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson: 10/14/07

Scripture: Hebrews 11:32-34, 12:1-2, Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

“Live Well!”

From the text: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles....’Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters...multiply there, and do not decrease.”

My first memory of a loved one dying happened to me rather late in life, at the age of 16, when my beloved grandmother Lucille, died suddenly of a heart attack at the all too young age of 51. It was in the summer, a hot July week, and after a funeral mass at the local church, which I must admit I remember little of in terms of the liturgy or the eulogy or anything that was said, our clan of 100 folks or so all went back to my Aunt Carol’s house and then began the real funeral celebration if you will, the real party, the service to honor Grandma’s life. Large platters of tasty cold cuts were laid out on the kitchen table, along with steaming crocks of my Dad’s homemade beans and the still warm tins of my grandmother’s famous meat pies, baked by her three daughters for this day. Cases of cold beer were bought and stacked up in coolers of dripping ice. A large cake from the local bakery was surrounded by anxious grandchildren all ready to dig in even before the main course. And my personal favorite, cheesy and oh so fattening and delicious au gratin potatoes piled high in a platter on a warmer. Then, for the next six hours or so, late into that warm summer night, we ate and talked and drank and laughed and cried and told stories and remembered Lucille: wife, Mom, grandmother, friend, and daughter of God.

It was a holy day, a holy day. Growing up Irish on the one side and French-Canadian on the other, I’ve been to a lot of such funerals in my 46 years. Being a pastor I’ve officiated at a couple hundred memorial services and spent many, many hours in grieving folks’ homes. And I’ve got to say the one constant I’ve noticed through all of these remembrances, these deaths, some sudden, some expected, all sad was....those au gratin potatoes! That comfort food! That familiar taste. This image of delicious food piled high on paper plates, balanced on knees, as folks share with each other the stories of the loved one who died. Au gratin potatoes: that’s how we deal with death in my family, in many circles of love: by living! By eating and partying! By celebrating! It is almost as if at the time of a death we stave off death’s sting, we deny its final word and power over those of us who live, by defiantly eating and carrying on. I mean after the condolence cards and the flowers, what’s the first thing we bring to the home of the deceased? Food! Casseroles. Cookies. Au gratin potatoes. Life, life, even as we face the truth of death, death.

In just these past two months here at Pilgrim Church we’ve faced into such death: Charlie Rockwell’s and Dave Friedman’s and of course, this week, the death of our pastor and friend, Ken Powell. These past six days have been so spiritually and emotionally intense for all of us in this church family, this town, our community. A couple weeks back some of us, as well, were hit with the death of a young woman, a young Mom, Eva Michalowski, from cancer. I spoke to one of her friends about this and

she said one of the hardest things for her, was going out into the world in her deep grief, and then seeing the rest of that world just carrying on, living. Kids going off to school, folks leaving for work and getting coffee at Dunkin Donuts, people talking about the Red Sox.

When death visits us, there's no doubt it is hard, it can be just awful, it can punch us in the spiritual solar plexus, devastate us, hurt us, make us question our faith, even this life. But then, and perhaps this is a gift from God, we the living, the left, we are still called to live. To go on. To weep but also to survive, even thrive again. That's why we eat so darn much after a funeral, that's why we cover the church in a symbol of natural life, flowers—it's like we look death in the eye and say, "You may be trying to get the final say in here, get me to roll over, to give up but I am not going to let you do this. I will live!"

Do you hear that? Now by living thus in the echo of death, we don't deny death's pain. We don't dodge the deep grief all of us must walk through when a precious loved one dies. We don't take a Pollyannaish view and casually say, "Well death is all for a reason" or "Death is part of some cosmic plan." No much of the time, even most of the time death is awful. Death robs of the time we might have had with a friend, a spouse, a child. Death is unfair. Death is sudden. Death just stinks.

But—the question for us as humans, as Christians, as a people who follow the master who beat death on the cross and in the empty tomb, Jesus: his question to us is, "How will you live in the face of death? When death happens, do you have the spiritual courage and commitment to live, to live?"

Our text from Jeremiah is so telling today. The prophet writes to a community in death, a community that has been exiled to a foreign country. He writes to a people dealing with the raw memory of a foreign army who invaded their homeland, sacked and burnt their Holy Temple, then carried off into slavery the survivors who were left behind. No doubt this beaten people could have been excused for pulling in and licking wounds and hunkering down and spiritually dying. But Jeremiah—he challenges them to poke a stick in the eye of death, of their captors, by defiantly carrying on, even thriving in their new home. He says to them, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles... 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters...multiply there, and do not decrease.'"

Live—live! Yesterday, as our church frenetically prepared for Ken's funeral I walked around this place to get a sense of how folks were doing. There were lots of tears and sadness and grief but so too there was lots of life here, life. I poked my head into the nursery and saw Francisco Stork playing babysitter to Annika and Tori Fredell as they drew away in coloring books and giggled with each other. I walked by the choir room as "Happy Birthday" was sung to David Tiedman. I witnessed hugs and embraces and reunions between old faith friends, brought together by the death of their teacher and pastor. I saw a piercing and bright blue New England fall sky that witnessed to God's beautiful creation. I saw life, so much life and I'll bet you did too.

Life here on earth—so wonderful even in death...and life eternal with God, life eternal with God. That's the other reason we as Christians dare to honor the dead by living fully: because we proclaim and affirm that death does not have ultimate power, that mortals in Christ become immortals in Christ when death finally comes to each and every one of us. Do I understand how this whole reality of heaven works, or Paradise, or

life everlasting? No. But in faith I believe with all of my heart and soul that when we say goodbye to a loved one it is but for awhile, until we meet them again under the loving gaze of our infinite God. God: 1, Death: Zero. That's the final score every single time.

As the poet John Donne proclaimed, "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee, Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow, Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me. One short sleep past, [then] we wake eternally, And death shall be no more...."

And death shall be no more....Au gratin potatoes—I'm going to grab a big plateful then sit down and in the midst of my tears and laughter tell stories about a loved one who has died, a loved one who now is with Jesus. Death has not won. Life is the victor! Let all God's people say, "Amen!"