

**“All Souls”**  
November 7th, 2021  
Rev. Laurel Gray

I’m conscious that we’ve spent a lot of time talking about death these last two weeks. It’s partially the season - last Sunday was Halloween and this first Sunday of November is when this community traditionally has an All Souls service. But it’s also because with Sylvia’s death and memorial service last week, there is fresh grief in our midst and that can also conjure that feeling of fresh grief for other loved ones we’ve lost. As our story so poignantly describes, that overwhelming feeling of loss ebbs and flows. And the challenge of grief is learning how to live again after someone dear to us has died.

As Lore described last week, stories about love transcending death exist in many cultures and lift up the power of remembering those who are gone.

It seems appropriate,too, that we’re having this service on daylight savings, a day when the balance of light and dark shifts so dramatically. And last Sunday was Halloween as well as Sowen.

In modern Irish, Sowen translates to summer’s end – it is a time for preparing for winter and taking stock of the year that had passed. The Celtic year is divided into two halves – the season of light and season of dark, with holidays marking those two transitions. Sowen falls between the autumn equinox and winter solstice. It is a recognition that cycles of death and birth are part of life.

In the Celtic tradition, it is believed that on this day, the veil between this world and the next thins, so we can feel closer to those who have left this world. Thus, it is part of pagan practice to make altars honoring those loved ones who have died, leaving out hot food and drink for them to enjoy. It is a way of calling back their memory, a moment to ask for their blessing or maybe their guidance.

When the Roman empire took over Celtic land, they started adopting these pagan traditions as Christian traditions. Then in the year 609, which was a very long time ago, Pope Boniface IV declared the day “All Saints’ Day” which was also commonly called All-Hallows. And today many of these traditions morphed into what we call Halloween.

But this is not a tradition exclusive to Celts – I suspect many of you, especially the youngest among us and your parents, have seen the Pixar movie Coco. Last week, Lore played a clip from the film as part of the service. It's a beautiful film and it centers around Dia de Los Muertos – the Mexican day of the dead. In Coco, we see similar traditions of making altars to ancestors, putting out photos and flowers and food. It's a way of honoring our loved ones who have died and keeping their memory alive in us.

In our children's story, they describe the practice of making a memory box about someone who has died - a way of fostering a sense of connection to their memory.

Typically, during our All Souls service, there's a bare tree on the altar and we take time writing out names of loved ones who have died and tying them to the empty branches.

Today we're going to do this as we did last year - not with a collective tree, but with a collective kind of memory box or altar, gathering up objects that remind us of those who have died. Like last year, Kala will play some music and I invite you to take these next few minutes to go and gather up some objects that remind you of the people you're remembering today. Or if you'd rather, stay in your seat and conjure those memories.

Maybe you have a favorite photo or family ring - maybe it's your dad's favorite shirt or something your sister gave you long ago. Maybe it was the way your grandmother smelled of lilies, or a poem that reminds you of a dear friend. There are many kinds of ancestors - not all are blood relatives. Whoever they are, whoever you are remembering I invite you to draw them close in object and in memory.

Kala is going to play some music and we'll take about five minutes to gather objects physically or in our minds. When we regather, we'll take a few moments to share.