

## The Cloud of Witnesses

Hebrews 12:1-3

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Mark S. Bollwinkel

We certainly get mixed messages about death on the All Saints Day weekend.

Our "All Hollows Eve/Halloween" secular celebration uses images of horror alongside superhero and fairytale costumes to speak our fears out loud while we wrap ourselves in the mythical mantles of those who can overcome them.

Then we come to church and claim the promise of eternal life for ourselves and those loved ones who are no longer with us, convinced that the love we share in this life can never die.

The Hispanic cultures teach us much about holding these ideas in tension with their papier-mâché, paintings, costumes and baked goods in the shapes of skulls and skeletons.

Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a traditional Meso-American holiday dedicated to... ancestors; it honors both death and the cycle of life. In Mexico, neighbors gather in local cemeteries to share food, music, and fun with their extended community, both living and departed. The celebration acknowledges that we still have a relationship with our ancestors and loved ones that have passed away.

In San Francisco, Day of the Dead has been celebrated in the Mission district since the early 70's with art, music, performances and a walking procession, which help [participants] contemplate our existence and mortality -- a moment to remember deceased friends

and family, and our connections beyond our immediate concerns.  
([dayofthedeadsf.org](http://dayofthedeadsf.org))

When it comes to the reality of death, of course, we are left with mysteries, questions and in the end, faith.

In the Christian tradition we can know at least these three things:

**Death is a cruel and capricious enemy.** The Apostle Paul calls death "the last enemy" which is destroyed by Christ's resurrection (I Corinthians 15:26). Children are swept away by cancers. Young people die in car accidents due to no fault of their own. Texas flood waters will take the life of a driver coming home from work (AP, 10/31/13). Alaysha Carradine, an eight year old girl at a sleep over with her best friend in Oakland, is shot to death by a stray bullet never intended for her, piercing the bedroom wall as a result of gang violence (*San Jose Mercury News*, 7/18/13).

Almost 10,000 Americans have died in gun violence since the massacre of 20 students and 6 teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, last December 14th ([huffingtonpost.com](http://huffingtonpost.com), 10/28/13); over a third of those statistic are suicides. The number of Americans killed in all the wars since 1775 is 1.17 million. The number of Americans killed by firearms, again almost 1/3 suicides since 1968 is 1.38 million ([TheGuardian.com](http://TheGuardian.com), *The Week*, 10/4/13).

The events in Santa Rosa this week remind us that even highly trained and experienced "good guys with a gun" can make deadly mistakes in the blink of an eye, something that firearms uniquely afford ([Reuters.com](http://Reuters.com) 10/23/13).

Death is a cruel and capricious enemy.

**Yet, death is not the opposite of life. There are things worse than death...principally never to have lived.**

It was been my privilege to preside at hundreds of funerals and memorial services. It is a unique gift for clergy to be invited into such a precious and intimate moment in the life of family and friends. When we remember the dead and celebrate their lives, not once in those hundreds of ceremonies

has anyone ever mentioned how much money was in the deceased's bank account on the day of their death, or how big their stock portfolio was. No one mentions their high school grade point average or what they got on their SAT.

Rather, the music and photographs and stories shared lift up the love that the deceased shared with those in life, especially those who live on. The academic, civic and/or professional accomplishments mentioned will always be in reference to the service it provided others - rarely the fame or wealth it brought the individual.

Whether we are burying a four-year-old or a ninety-four-year old, what we will take with us after they are gone is the love we shared with them. There are things much worse than physical death. Much, much worse is never to have really lived.

**Lastly, one thing our tradition makes very clear is that death is not the final answer; in fact love gets the last word.**

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us of the "cloud of witnesses" that surround and support our own race in life. Throughout chapter 11, the writer has listed the heroes of our faith from Abel and Noah, to Abraham and Sarah, Issac and Jacob, Joseph and Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, David and more. Those whose memories encourage and inspire us to the best come with names. We list them in our own genealogies. We list them in our hearts.

As we take the Sacrament of Holy Communion this morning there shall be a time when we speak their names out loud and a time when we list them silently in our hearts. We remember their names because of the love we shared with them. Citing the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the writer of Hebrews reminds us that death never gets the final word for love never dies.

I am convinced that the only thing we take with us into the mystery of the next life is the loved we have made and shared with each other. In the end it is the only measure of the value of our tiny fraction of time on this earth. That means we can look death squarely in the face for what it is,

acknowledge its reality, its cruelty and capriciousness while at the same time determined to define our living and the lives of others by the love we share and shared with them, over which death has no hold.

Amen.