

The Thin Place in the Heart of God

All Saints Day 2021

Valerie Bridgeman

Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Delaware, Ohio

In 1984, the movie *Places in the Heart* featured Sally Fields and Danny Glover. Fields plays a widow whose husband died suddenly and who was left to figure out how to make a living from the 40-acre farm they had.¹ Glover's character was a "hobo" who showed up on her steps for food and stayed to work the farm. In some sense, they become "family" in a community and time—central Texas in Depression era United States—when a white woman and her children and a black man in community together would have been in danger. Indeed, in the movie, though the plotline of the Klan was not developed, at least one scene hinted at the racial tension. While I thought of this movie as I reflected on the texts for and the meaning of All Saints' Day, what I remembered about this movie was its ending. The last scene is in a church that we have not seen anywhere else in the movie. And the people are receiving and sharing communion among themselves. And the people are both living and dead. Read that again: at the communion, the last scene of this movie, the people receiving communion are both living and dead.

Often when approaching All Saints' Day, I think of this movie and of *Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead, which originated in Mexico, though it currently is celebrated through Latin America and its diaspora. According to the National Geographic site, "*Día de los Muertos* draws on indigenous Aztec rituals and Catholicism, which is why it becomes connected with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day (November 1 and 2)."² The celebration is not one of mourning, but of dancing and food, singing and laughter. Participants are to remember that the dead are just beyond us and stay alive because we remember them. Some of this joining of what looks like Halloween and "evil," particularly to more conservative Christians, has been rejected. I do not make this observation regarding conservative upbringings in a pejorative way. I grew up in such an environment, though I think my environs were more generous than I have heard from some of my friends. But we were told to be "careful" playing with the demonic (what my holiness father considered Halloween to be) and trying to communicate with the dead.

All these years later, I remember some of those admonitions. And, even as we were allowed limited trick-or-treating in our small town, as I grew older in our holiness churches, more people insisted on holding All Hallows' Eve gatherings in the church fellowship hall, playing bible games, and if children were allowed to dress up, they were asked to do so as a bible character. They often renamed the night, in an attempt to distance the church for the "worldly" celebration. I remember vividly discussions about how King Saul disobeyed God by engaging with a witch (!) who called up the dead prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 28:3–25) as a cautionary tale to warn us against "playing with the dead," since it was akin to playing with demons. Such a story may sound odd to some, since for many mainline Christians Halloween has always been a day of fun and candy, and effectively divorced from the Catholic understanding of All Saints' Day or the Mexican Day of the Dead, where dressing as a

skeleton or some other other-worldly creature is a part of honoring those who have gone before.

As I turn toward the revised lectionary texts for this year's All Saints' Day, I share with you just one more story. When I was 9, my mother's father died from an aggressive form of cancer. I grew up in the era when children were not allowed to visit sick people in the hospital, and my grandfather—a 40-acre farmer owner who also was a janitor at a local hospital—landed in the hospital where we could not see him. Nearly 60 years later, I remember still the forlorn feeling of not being able to see him. And my mother and grandmother did not explain to any of us that he was terminal. I don't know whether that was because they didn't know or because they believed it was too much for children as young as we were. But the night my grandfather Paw Paw (Kempis Julius McKinney) died, I was in my bed in our small home in the country. And he "visited" me. I mean by this statement that I had an ethereal encounter with my grandfather. He was not in a body; he was see-through, and he talked with me. He told me not to be afraid. He said that he would be with me and that God loves me. I was not asleep. When my mother came home from the hospital, I ran to tell her that Paw Paw had come to visit me and told her what he had said. She grew pale, and she asked me to repeat it. This time, I told her what time the visitation occurred.

When I was in my twenties, she told me that the time I had told her was the exact time he was pronounced dead at the hospital. But that night she had told me never to repeat the story again. I was confused and hurt, but it was not until I was in my 20s that I repeated the story, told my siblings, and talked through it with a counselor. I was in a faith crisis in those years and had begun to have dreams of my Gran Gran who was dead by then but did not come to me like Paw Paw. The dreams were vivid and full of information about how she made teas and for what ailments. At the time, I was in the bed for chronic bronchitis and barely able to breathe. I was praying constantly with every cough and fever and being visited every night.

It was remembering those visitations that made me start taking All Saints' Day seriously. I started meditating on Hebrews 12:1 and thinking that my grandparents are a part of the Great Cloud of Witnesses that surround us and cheer us on. I started reading African based spirituality and remembering how my dad, my holiness preacher dad, liked to tell ghost stories. He would tell us, "There are haints (his word for ghosts) out there. We don't see them because of all these lights now, but they are there, and they will make themselves known if you want to know them." I started remembering how my Gran Gran would put out food and a bowl of water when someone "crossed over" from this life into the next life so that their journey would be easier, and how she would cover the mirrors during a wake. I have since learned that this tradition of covering the mirrors so that the soul of the dead person does not get trapped crosses many ethnic traditions around the world.³ In Celtic spirituality, my encounters with my ancestors would have occurred at a thin place, a place on earth where crossing between earth and other realms (e.g., heaven, the underworld, where fairies lived, etc.) is easily accessed.

What I have come to believe is that death, the portal to another life, is the thin place that reveals God's heart for humanity. Perhaps when Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-4 observes that the "souls of the righteous are in the hand of God" (v.1),⁴ that it is only in the "eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died" (v.2), "they are at peace" (v.3), and "their hope is full of immortality" (v.4), we see a glimpse of that thin place. It is

foolish to think that the dearly departed are departed at all. When African American Christians sometimes refuse to even use the phrase “they died” but rather “they passed on” or “they crossed over,” perhaps they have tuned into these notions reflected in this text. I am aware that we do not often preach from Wisdom of Solomon, but for this All Saints’ Day, perhaps we should consider this text and allow the stories of the dearly departed to arise.

Perhaps we should have a full-on intertextual dialogue for the season and also consider allowing the hope of the resurrection to ascend, where those who have left this plane are free of the limitations of human bodily existence, though not free from human emotions. Indeed, the book of Revelation tells us that God will “wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). As I use the term “intertextual,” I would include the lives and stories of the people to contemplate the thin line of God’s grace where we remind ourselves of the assurance reflected in the 1983 statement written for the Presbyterian Church (USA): “in life and in death, we belong to God.”⁵ We might remind our listeners that the “we” in the statement of faith may mean only Christians who have trusted in God, but in the Isaiah text for this lectionary (Isa. 25:6-9), we learn that God provides a feast for “all peoples” (v.6) and that God swallows up death for “all peoples” and “all nations” over which a shroud is spread (v. 7). Just as in the Revelation text, God wipes away tears for everyone. Preachers might challenge those of us in confessional denominations to consider whether we believe the confessions we speak, like the one above that I mention or any of the ancestral confessions of the saints who have crossed the thin line of God’s grace and who now are in the great cloud of witnesses. Do we, in fact, believe in the communion of saints?⁶ Are we open to the daily scene of the saints being with us, those unlikely people at the table of communion, like in the movie *Places in the Heart*?

Is it not good news to contemplate our ongoing relationship in the whole of God’s heart with people who have “crossed over,” but who feast at the communion table with us? In a world so burdened as it has been since early 2020 with a global pandemic, it is not magical thinking to imagine this grace, but rather a part of our faith. How do we frame the conversation so that we honor our tears (not asking people not to cry), especially since “Jesus wept” in the John text for this season (John 11:32-44)? How do we honor the grief and sorrows that attend the human experience and avoid suggesting that to cry is somehow faithless? Remember, when we preach that in John’s gospel, the people interpreted Jesus’ tears as he speaks to Lazarus’s sister Mary with these words: “See how he loved him!” (v. 36). I have a friend who reminds me every time someone dear to me dies that we grieve, not merely because we have lost someone we love, but because we have lost someone who loves us. While preachers have interpreted “Jesus wept” in theological term, e.g., Jesus was grieved because Mary and Martha (and the other disciples) did not believe in the resurrection or in his power, I prefer his grief, even as he was familiar with the thin place between the living and dead.

Maybe the preacher could help people tap into that hopeful grief on All Saints’ Day, remembering such love with joy in the midst of grief. Perhaps it is a time to emphasize the thin place that uncovers the heart of God. There has been so much loss due to the global pandemic that I imagine people might be uncomfortable in the communion of grief. But if the preacher can tap into John’s story about Lazarus’s

resurrection, it may help people face their grief, their uncertainties, and even their anger. We have not received our dead back, as Mary and Martha did in John's account. We may have covered the mirrors or had a repast meal with a few people to tell the stories of our dead and to honor them—even if we had to do it over some distance platform like Zoom. If we did, these gatherings were among our encounters with the thin places where our longing meets God's heart for humanity. And All Saints' Day is a perfect time to tap into such preaching.

Notes

1 For a review, more about the cast, and some clips of the movie, see the following site, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087921/>, accessed July 28, 2021.

2 "Día de los Muertos," <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/dia-de-los-muertos/>, accessed July 28, 2021.

3 Growing up in our family, it was a "given" that the mirrors would be covered, especially if the person died in the home or the wake was held in the home. I never knew why, and learning these practices in order to understand our relationship to and with those who have died continues to fascinate me. See these websites for more information. You might find interesting Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find a Good Death* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company; Reprint Edition, 2018). These websites may also be of interest: Lucie Sarr, "African Traditional Religion and the Veneration of Ancestors," *LaCroix International*, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/culture/african-traditional-religion-and-the-veneration-of-ancestors/12277>, accessed July 28, 2021. See also, "Covering Mirrors in House of Mourning," <https://www.aish.com/atr/Covering-Mirrors-in-House-of-Mourning.html>, accessed July 28, 2021; Klaudia Krystyna, "Why Do Some Cultures Cover Mirrors After a Death?" <https://www.joincake.com/blog/covering-mirrors-after-death/>, accessed July 28, 2021.

4 All scriptural excerpts are from the *New Revised Standard Version* used by the Revised Common Lectionary.

5 "The Brief Statement of Faith," Presbyterian Mission Agency, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120728223725/http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/101/brief-statement-faith/>, accessed August 3, 2021.

6 In the final stanza of the Apostles' Creed, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/apostles-creed-traditional-ecumenical>, accessed August 3, 2021.