

Homily: "They Are with Us Still" Rev. Martha Hodges  
October 28, 2007

The following reading is from Studs Terkel's *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, his oral history of death and dying. It is taken from an interview with Carlos Cortez, a painter and poet, age 76 at the time of his interview for this book.

Among the Mexicans, they sort of celebrate death. It's a way of honoring the recently departed and honoring one's roots. Without death, there is no life: they're mutually dependent. It's just a process of the circle...

The 2<sup>nd</sup> of November is called *el dia de los muertos*, the Day of the Dead. When the Spanish priests came over, it happened to coincide with All Souls' Day, just the way it coincides with the Anglo-Saxon Halloween. It happens at a time of year when the last green has disappeared and people are reminded of the impermanence of existence. At the same time, there's continuity to it. It's a celebration that we've lived and that we've had a good life, that we've done our part...

When they celebrate the Day of the Dead, they build their home altars and put offerings for the departed there, and photographs of the recently departed. And on that night they go to the cemetery. First they clean off the tombstone and whitewash it, decorate it with flowers. And then they sit down and have lunch with their departed, and spend the night with them. Sometimes you'll see musical groups out there, mariachi bands.

The poet Octavio Paz says that in Paris and London, the word *death* gets caught on the tongue, burns the tongue. But in Mexico, they embrace it, they play with it. And they celebrate it. It's illustrated in the toys that are found around the Day of the Dead. Skeletons, little pushcarts with skeletons are given to the children. It says to them, *This is what you'll become someday. Don't be afraid of death.* Life is a celebration, and death means you're reminded of the life you will someday no longer live. If we live a good life, we will live on with those who remember us. We're but moments in eternity. But we've been a part of it.

We, the living, cannot let them go, the dead. Whether seriously or in jest, we invite them back into our lives in traditions such as the Day of the Dead and Halloween. It is difficult to conceive of a world that is no longer home to those we knew and loved. But whether we believe in an afterlife or not, ours is a culture that fears and rejects death. Here in the US, we deal with its mystery in a very different way than in Mexico. How enviable that easy and even jaunty relationship with death – one that embraces death, celebrates it and even plays with it!

The ghosts in our folklore and popular culture are not the benign spirits who visit us once a year to pay their respects and enjoy a glass of beer with us. Our ghosts tend to be frightening, gory, vengeful creatures. In horror films, ghost stories and even in the celebration of Halloween, we Americans attempt to tame our fears by mocking them – by

mocking dearth itself. We turn the dead into caricatures, at best spiteful, and at worst, murderous. By exaggerating their otherness, we reassure ourselves that they do not exist. The angry, fearsome ghost becomes a cartoon character – laughable, and so, less frightening.

Why, I wonder, do our ghosts tend to be so scary – so threatening? Why do we portray them as out to get us? Well, maybe, as a culture, we don't deal so well with bad consciences. For, make no mistake, we are haunted – and not for just one day a year. At least I am... and I suspect I am not alone. We live daily with the spirits of the dead.

Oh, not the kind of spirits that haunt the attic, wailing, sobbing and blowing out candles. I don't hear unexplained knockings in the middle of the night. No, my ghosts are easier to explain. If they are frightening, it is only because they remind me of my own failures – most often, failures to be the loving person I want to be. In memory, I relive moments in which I spoke harshly, or kept silent when I should have spoken. Moments when I withheld a smile or an embrace, a grudge I refused to let go of.

If we *did* believe that our loved ones continued to watch us, if they *were* here with us, what would that feel like, I wonder? Would they forgive us for all those failures of love? Surely, they would have transcended the petty emotions of the living. From their vantage point beyond life, surely they would understand all, and, understanding all, forgive all. Surely, they would love us. I'd like to think so.

But one thing is beyond question: our ghosts do linger. They are the stories we tell ourselves about the dead. They are remembered facial expressions and gestures – a raised eyebrow or a raised voice. We find ourselves repeating their favorite phrases. Sometimes in the middle of a funny story or ridiculous situation, we notice ourselves thinking how they would have laughed. Sometimes, we realize with a shock that we know exactly what they would say about that bumper sticker, or the way we make spaghetti sauce, or even our choice of mate or career. If they are our parents, perhaps we even catch a glimpse of them in our mirror as we brush our teeth or see their features in the faces of our children. They haunt our dreams. They color our expectations of ourselves and of the world. This is the “silent ministry” of the dead.

But what if this ministry is not so benign? What if the memory is of an abusive or rejecting parent? A friend who betrayed us? A spouse who wounded or belittled us? These ghosts, too, we must live with.

Over the years, with any luck, we become more able to choose the stories we tell ourselves. Will our ghosts be friendly or reproachful? Will they taunt us or comfort us? Will we forgive and be forgiven? We will not forget past wrongs – theirs or ours – but with time, we can learn to live with them in peace. We can remind ourselves that those who hurt us were living with their own ghosts, as best they could. For the dead are with us, for better or worse.

Our ghosts are only what we create – what we choose to see. In a real sense, we do summon them, just as the Mexicans do on the day of the Dead. Perhaps the stories, the ghosts we summon, have a purpose. Maybe their ministry – the ministry of our memories – is to teach us how to live. For those of us for whom grief is mixed with old angers – which I'd guess is most of us – the lesson may be to rebel, to have courage, to survive. Perhaps the lesson of our dead is that life is precious and happiness worth fighting for, despite the pain – the pain that remains from hurtful relationships, or the pain that lingers from the loss of loving ones. Perhaps to remember the dead really is to celebrate life, as Carlos Cortez said. To celebrate not just their lives, but our own.

So let us raise a glass to our ghosts. May we welcome their presence among us with honor and gratitude. Living, they helped to make us who we are; their continuing silent companionship helps us to grow into who we will become. May we learn to live with them in peace.