

November 3, 2024
All Saints Sunday
Revelation 21:1-6a
John 11:32-44
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

A Time to Mourn and a Time to Quilt

Yesterday morning, Lorraine Lynch and I met up to represent Emmanuel as a part of what I suspect will be the first annual Norwood Wellness Fair, sponsored by Norwood's school committee. We were one of many exhibitors, which included groups like Impact Norwood, a group committed to helping Norwood's youth be drug and alcohol free, a community art group, a group working on digital and technological safety for children and youth, a Karate studio, some of the Norwood sports teams, some medical and dental practices, the Norwood school system nutrition services, and at least one other church, along with many others. The idea behind the fair was that each presenter, each community partner, was supposed to share some aspect of wellness that their organization highlighted with those who came to their booth. The organizers of the event had identified 10 aspects of wellness that they wanted to address which included:

- Physical
- Mental
- Emotional
- Spiritual
- Digital
- Creative
- Social

And three others that I can't remember right now.¹

What Lorraine and I did was bring a Lutheran World Relief quilt, the bottom, the batting, and the top, and invite people to help pin and tie it. While we were

showing them how to do it, we talked to them about the life-giving help that the quilts give to the recipients, helping them with their physical wellness and we hope, emotional wellness, helping them know that people care about them and bringing some beauty and color into their lives. We also talked about the way in which making the quilts contributed to our wellness, giving many a creative outlet and all of us who work on them, especially those who come to pin and tie them on Saturday mornings in February and March a social, emotional, and spiritual boost as well.

I must say that something that I never imagined that I'd be doing on Saturday morning in the Norwood High School cafeteria was explaining Martin Luther's concept of salvation by grace alone through faith alone to part of Norwood High School's football team while they helped me pin a Lutheran World Relief quilt, but they asked, so I did. The linebackers and corner backs we had help us pin were amazed at how challenging it was and they got really excited when they got a pin through a corner.

Many of the people we talked to yesterday morning took one of our flyers that told them about our quilting project on one side, and on the other side also told them about many other things we do at Emmanuel to support people's social, emotional, and spiritual health, mentioning things like worship, fellowship hour, online worship, prayer group, First Friday Faith Formation, Pot-luck meals, Confirmation, Men's Breakfast Group, Pick Up Choir, Hand Bell Choir, and so on. It wasn't a comprehensive list, because I ran out of both time and space on the paper, but it was a good representative list.

As I was getting ready for today's worship service and hanging the All Saints stained glass windows, and thinking about those we have lost and those who are remembering them today and always, I got thinking about how important and how healthy it is to grieve and to remember. That's another aspect of wellness that this congregation and the church year gives us. Space to remember. Space to grieve.

Perhaps both of those things would fall under the category of emotional wellness, but in some ways, grief feels like a category all its own, it can loom so large in our lives. And once a year, on All Saints Sunday, we are given space to remember and to grieve.

As I hung up the stained glass windows² that people here at Emmanuel have made, this year and last year, I thought about how lovely it was to have people remembered in this way, so that the light and color and joy and meaning of their lives and our memories of them can be a tangible part of our worship service, as we celebrate our saints and all saints, drawn near. And truly, through the teachings of our faith, we know that the saints who have gone before us, our beloved ones, are never far from us.

We encounter them our worship, which is a reflection of their worship around the throne of God.

We encounter them in the communion meal, which is a foretaste of the feast to come.

We believe that they pray for us. “Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up, ‘How long?’” we sang in the hymn, *The Church’s One Foundation* last Sunday.

It is good for us to remember. It’s healthy. It is good for us to grieve. It’s healthy. And it’s good for us to have hope. For the saints are not far from us.

In our gospel reading for today, we have a story of grief. Mary and Martha’s brother, Lazarus has died, and the community has gathered with them to grieve with them. You probably know what that’s like. When someone dies family and friends, gather round, bring casseroles and baked goods, and hang around for a few days, trying to make sure that those who are most directly affected by a death are supported and cared for. They weep with those who are weeping. We see this in the story of Lazarus. Their neighbors have gathered with Mary and Martha as they

mourn the death of their brother. Jesus and his disciples came too, to mourn with them.

And the text tells us that Jesus grieved. He mourned with Mary and Martha. He was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” (John 11:33b) And he wept at the grave of Lazarus his friend.

The story of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, this family torn asunder by death, by grief, does not end there. It does not end in grief and suffering, but that’s where it starts and it would be a mistake to move too quickly away from that.

For that’s what we know. We hope for the joy of resurrection, but we don’t know that joy. Not now. Not yet. But we know Mary and Martha, weeping by the tomb. We know the stark practicalities of death, when a beloved body moves beyond our reach, beyond our touch, as decay sets in. We know their grief filled words, flung at Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (John 11:32b) “God where were you, when our dear one died?” That’s how we might put it today.

Lazarus’s story, ends in a way that no one, not Mary and Martha, not Jesus’ disciples, certainly not the relatives and neighbors who were there to grieve with Mary and Martha, seemed to expect. And if we have heard this story so many times that we expect it, then we need to hear it again with fresh ears. Lazarus was dead. Dead and buried. Dead for four days. Already there was a stench dead. Dead and decaying. And Jesus called him out of death to life again. “Lazarus! Come out!” (John 11:43)

The dead man came out (John 11:44a). Still bound in his grave clothes. Still wrapped, so that he could barely walk, so that he could not see the sun. And Jesus told those who were gathered there to unbind him and let him go. (John 11:44b)

That is where we are heading. To resurrection, to death and decay turned backward, toward being unbound and freed. But we are not there yet. For now

Lazarus is a symbol and hope for us, and for all of our beloved ones who have gone before us to the grave.

But it's okay if today we are more like the before versions of Mary and Martha, mourning beside our closed-up tombs, and remembering our beloved ones. Living with loss and living in hope that Jesus has called them by name and wiped every tear from their eyes and that for them and someday for us mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Yesterday morning, I told a lot of people about the social, emotional, creative and spiritual benefits that I had found in quilting.

I never quilted before this year. I've wanted to ever since I got to Emmanuel and saw the beautiful things people made for the Lutheran World Relief quilts. I wanted to do it too. To play with colors and textures and make something beautiful that would help people in need. There were some challenges in my way, though. I didn't own a sewing machine and I didn't know how to sew. But, I figured, I can shop and I can learn. I got a sewing machine for a Christmas gift a few years ago and Abigail, who studying costuming at college, among other things, taught me how to use it. It took me almost 10 years, but this winter, I made my first two quilts. And since then, I've made nine more. In my spare time. (Ha ha).

I really don't have that much spare time, but here's what helps me find the time. It's a tough time that we're living in; an anxious time. There's a lot of be worried about and a lot of suffering in the world. And I feel like there's not a lot that I can do about it. But here's what I try not to do about it. I try not to waste my time and energy worrying. Instead, I try to quilt, to make something beautiful for someone who needs it, for someone who has a lot more to worry about than I do, a lot more loss, a lot more troubles than I do. I try to make something that will bring some color and hope and beauty into his or her life.

To me, that feels like a healthy response to the troubles of the world. I'm never going to fix them all, but I can do my small part to shift the balance; beauty

for ashes, hope for despair, care and kindness in an often unkind and uncaring world.

And you help me to do that, my church helps me to that. We help each other do that. We eat meals together, we help each other grieve, we tell each other stories of hope, we make quilts and kits together, we pray for and with each other, we buy food for the food pantry so others do not go hungry. We help each other stay well, sometimes physically, but even when we're not physically well, then socially, emotionally, creatively, and spiritually well. Which we all need in troubled times, while we wait for Jesus to call our names, to set us free, to wipe away the tears, and bring us home, with all of our beloved ones, with all the saints, to where anxiety, worry, death and mourning and pain and crying will be no more. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ I asked Lorraine after in-person worship and she couldn't remember the three other wellness categories either.

² The "stained glass windows" are actually cardstock with cutouts covered with tissue paper that lets the light shine through. People create them in memory of their loved ones. They are embellished with photographs, drawings, stickers, words, and other decorative items.