

Rev. Tim Seery
Congregational Church of La Jolla
October 31, 2021

Gracious God, May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight. Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

It's been a long time since I have prayed that prayer. I don't do it in my online messages because those are such a different experience for me... those are like radio and this is public speaking. You'd be surprised how different it is to preach in that format versus this one. But it's good to be back in this pulpit.

I also asked that we not change the paraments this week because this is sort of a time capsule. Our last time in here was March of 2020... which was Lent, I had just given a sermon on how hand washing should be a Lenten practice for all of us. And the rest was history. We had no idea what was in store.

The Scripture reading today from Revelation frankly, is bizarre. Just as most of Revelation is. But it's a good one for today. For all Saints Day. It was written by a man in exile at a time when Christians were being persecuted, hunted down, and killed.

Today, with this being our first in door service it feels like we are also on the tail end of a time of exile and chaos as well.

And in the midst of this chaos, and this fear, and this uncertainty for the future God told John that there was more to be written, more to unfold. That the tree of life would keep growing despite those who might want to cut it down. That God would wipe every tear from every eye.

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. One of the few times, other than Ash Wednesday, when we really reflect on the issue of mortality. This time we do so by honoring those who have passed into the communion of saints before us. Those who have lit the way. Those who have inspired us. Those who we have lost too soon. As well as those who tread the path faithfully and who lived long, full, and meaningful lives. Those who completed their service here and have gone on to their next chapter...

The past two years have really forced us to reflect on our impermanence. As many of us know names of people who were here among us when we were last together in this sanctuary and who now aren't. When we last sat in these pews we had no idea the magnitude of the global health emergency we were in the midst of. There's 6.9 million people who aren't on this earth now who were when we last gathered.

Among this church there have been four members we lost during this pandemic. It was my honor to get to preside at two of their online memorial services and a grave side service last year. This morning I want to revisit each of them. And reflect on all of the things that made each of them special. I have listed them here in the order in which we lost them during the pandemic.

Jerry Richards

Jerry Richards is one of the few people I've ever heard of who got to reenact a biblical parable in the modern age. In the Gospel of Matthew we hear about Jesus healing a leper. At the time lepers were kept far away on the outskirts of town so even regular townspeople of that time would not have been so familiar with this. Nevertheless upon hearing Jesus was around a leper came to him, prostrated himself before him and asked for healing. 1,970 some years later a patient exhibiting unusual symptoms came to Dr. Jerry Richards office also seeking healing. Healing from something that is today more unusual to the casual eye than it even was in biblical days. Jerry correctly diagnosed the patient with leprosy. Either this patient had traveled abroad and been exposed or had come in contact with leprosy in small pockets of the American Southeast where it still exists, but nonetheless Jerry called it correctly. But this shouldn't be shocking for all of you. This is a guy who combined college and medical school into one experience with efficiency. This is someone who practically self studied to pass boards in dermatopathology so that he could personally analyze cells under a microscope, so that he could continue to push himself to pursue excellence in his craft, determined to stay steadfast to his mission to provide no nonsense care to his patients. To Jerry this was real, urgent, and important. As he would say, not a dress rehearsal.

I also learned that among Jerry's many patients were the royal family of the United Arab Emirates. Joan told me of how the Sheikh's plane picked Jerry and his friend and allergy specialist Bob Reid up in London adorned with its bedrooms and gold toilets and gold sinks. I am sure Jerry had to have been shocked as he headed toward the palace to meet His Royal Highness with a driver who apparently sped along at 90 mph. No wonder Jerry didn't believe in dress rehearsals. After that experience I wouldn't either. Jerry got to spend over a week in Abu Dhabi, a guest of its highest family, visiting wildlife preserves, palaces, riding camels, and doing a few biopsies in between.

Jerry Allen

When I conducted the online memorial for Jerry Allen I likened him to one of the Magi. Jerry was the one you would go to for council and guidance. And rightly so. Jerry served as the treasurer of this church for many years. And everyone remember this particular detail. I think it is because he asked the right questions, he paid attention to detail. And he was a good steward of everything he was ever entrusted with. His reputation followed him around on all manner of things from the art collection he curated, to the ocean front view out of his living room window of his Colony Hill home, to the lemons from his lemon tree, to his dapper personal style and his unmistakable presence at church events.

But also the Magi in the Christmas story were stylish, full of pizzaz and were interesting people. Jerry lived with pizzaz, style, and confidence as well. But behind all of this was a biography that was even more jaw dropping.

But also he came bearing little treasures... whether it was letting you experience his art collection, play his home slot machine, or take lemons from his tree. He would come bearing the gifts of his time, his talent, and his treasurer. He would serve in any way he could. Like the Magi Jerry would be Guided by the star to the Christ child and upon arrival he would pour out all he had in service and adoration.

He worked as a teenager and bought a house for his mother with his earnings. He faithfully served a country to protect freedoms which at that time were not freedoms always afforded to him. He landed a distressed plan in a foreign country after it failed over the ocean. He broke the glass ceiling at American Airlines as a person of color in an industry and in a country that was unsure if it wanted him to. And because he wasn't afraid to go first he made this nation safer and our skies more inclusive and equitable for all.

Fred Koestner

I will always miss Fred. Fred was a friend of this church who came here by way of his companion and wife, Ann. Fred always had a story to share. He always reached out. He always greeted me when I entered the sanctuary every Sunday. He was a friend to all of us. I will miss his warmth. I will always miss his grace. His motto was to not worry about things over which he had no control. Sage advice for all of us. May it be so with our lives too.

Sue Belliston

Sue Belliston who came to the church by way of Peggy and Nate who were her neighbors but they were more than just neighbors, Peggy and Nate were her family. And they brought here to this church which Sue enjoyed for several years.

She was raised in Oklahoma raised in Illinois but had made California her home since 1992.

Like Jerry Allen, Sue also had the call placed on her life to connect people to their destinations. She spent her career with the Metropolitan Transit of San Diego as a bus driver and she worked the same route for most of her career. Route 16. She loved her passengers and she was good at what she did.

She loved shopping and she loved discovering new things and adding them to her collection and also expressing her generosity by giving things to her neighbors. She was a public servant who served the public by connecting them, caring for them, and being generous. And we are grateful that Peggy and Nate loved and cared for Sue so much as to share their church home with her.

Joan Kastner

My favorite memory of Joan is getting invited to drink margaritas by the ocean with her and Marty. Joan told me the best things to order when eating at White Sands and she always was full of surprises. She was one of the many New Englanders who we have had in this congregation. She loved to talk about Vermont. Then once you got to know her further you'd find out she was a graduate of Vassar and that supporting Vassar and the Seven Sister Colleges was a deep passion and love for her. She loved to talk about her children and her grandchildren and she loved adventure. I remember once she told me that one of her grandchildren was having a destination wedding in San Miguel de Allende and while she had determined it probably wasn't best for her health to do quite that much adventure at that time, you could tell that she wanted to do it so bad. There was a twinkle in her eye where you could tell she was fantasizing just for a minute that she was there in that beautiful city on an adventure celebrating her grandson.

We all were lucky enough to experience Joan's true passion: which was music. She graced our choir for a long time. She was featured prominently in our Blessing of the Animals choral piece where she made the sound of the coo coo bird. She even happily used an iPhone app to play hand bells with the choir. Whether it was leading girl scout troops, raising money for Vassar, volunteering for the League of Women Voters and Planned Parenthood, or attending operas and symphonies with Rex she was always doing something to affect change in our society. Joan's last time in this church was on March 8, 2020 and she stayed late so she could watch the movie we were showing on the life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. When RBG spoke of the women's movement in the 60s Joan, who was sitting in the front row, raised her fist in the air in support of it and was beaming with delight.

The RBG film was Joan's last experience in this building. And since that day both RBG and Joan have gone on to their next chapter. Joan and Rex are the sort of people who keep living forever, because their philanthropy, wisdom, and spirit get bound up into stories which are shared forevermore. They leave their mark on the institutions they loved and because of that they live on as legends among us, who continue to guide us and inspire us.

Joan faced her death with grace and dignity. Just like how she faced her life. When she announced her decision to her family to pursue her final days she did so with a poem that I think all four of our saints, both Jerrys, Sue, and Joan would endorse:

*I carry you with me into the world,
into the smell of rain
and the words that dance between people
and for me, it will always be this way,
walking in the light,
remembering being alive together.*

May we, too, remember being alive, together.

Amen.