**In Memoriam Sunday Meditation**

**Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**Nov. 26, 2017**

Today is In Memoriam Sunday, also known as Memorial Sunday or Eternity Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the church calendar, and thus a time to look back at the past year and to name and remember the loved ones who have recently left our midst, and yet who remain a part of us.

 In traditional Christian theological language, we speak of those who have died as belonging to the “communion of saints” or the great “cloud of witnesses” which surround us. It’s a beautiful image of those who have died and those still living nevertheless belonging to one community and remaining connected. For us, as people who “walk in the resurrection,” following the One who was raised from the dead, this is the embodiment of our belief that love is stronger than death. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson has this to say about the communion of saints: “If living persons share in the life of God, and if the dead are likewise still clasped by the living God, then both the living and the dead are united to each other, forged into one community by the same vivifying Spirit. [The Apostle] Paul puts this insight succinctly: ‘whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For this end Christ died and rose again, that he might be Lord of both the living and the dead’ (Rom. 14:7-9).”[[1]](#footnote-1)

 In a similar way, Hebrews 12 depicts those who have gone before as a “cloud of witnesses,” stating, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1-2). This image of a “cloud of witnesses” speaks both to their countless number and to their role as encouraging examples of the faith for the living. In fact, Hebrews here uses the metaphor of a sports arena, with those who have passed away as the spectators, cheering for those who are still running the race of life.[[2]](#footnote-2) We know this on some level as we at times have a strong sense the ongoing presence of our deceased loved ones with us, as we remember them and they continue to influence our lives, as we continue to learn from their examples and their wisdom long after the conclusion of their lives. In these ways, our love for one another carries on, connected by the loving Spirit of God.

In their day, Jesus’ friends and disciples, too, learned about the true depth of God’s life-giving power as they met the risen Jesus on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24). Not able to grasp the true meaning of the moment, they did not recognize Jesus in the stranger who joined them on their journey, even though their hearts burned within them as they spoke with him. It was not until they had gathered around a table together and he blessed and broke bread for them that they perceived the presence of Christ among them. It was then that they glimpsed the power of God to bring life from death, and the reality that those who put Jesus to death did not succeed in doing away with him.[[3]](#footnote-3) He was with his friends and loved ones still.

So today we take the time to name our loved ones who have gone before us and yet are still with us, surrounding us like a cloud, in ongoing communion with us. They are not forgotten but are held forever in “the unimaginable, life-giving embrace of the living God.”[[4]](#footnote-4) AMEN

1. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Johnson, 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM/Philadelphia:Trinity International, 1990), 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Johnson, 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)