

All Saints Sunday is one of my favorite celebrations in the church year.

Time to remember parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and historical figures who have impacted my life.

Time to remember the stories and lessons they told.

Today one of those friends I remember who recently passed through death to eternal life is Dennis Anderson, who was President of Trinity Lutheran Seminary when I was called to serve as Director of admissions and later when called as Pastor to the Community and Director of the Summer Seminary Sampler Program.

Whenever Dennis met a prospective student he would ask them three questions:

1. For whom are you compassionate? Families, little children, the elderly, the imprisoned, the unemployed he sick, the mentally ill, injured veterans, orphans, etc. Who is it that tugs deeply at your heart strings?
2. What is your passion? If you could do one thing every day of your life, what would it be? What do you enjoy? Who do you want to e with? What gifts and talents can you employ?
3. What five or six words do you want on your tombstone when you die? How do you want to be remembered? (*Never met anyone unloved by God.*)

For thirteen summers I led two groups of high school juniors and seniors who came to the seminary for three weeks. They took classes with professors, did service work in the community, and learned what called employees to their jobs, and they explored their gits and talents. On the day we visited Wittenberg University I always took them to a large cemetery nearby, posed the Three Anderson Questions, and read them “The Dash” poem. Perhaps you’ve heard it. Linda Ellis wrote this words:

*I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral
of a friend. He referred to the dates on the tombstone
from the beginning . . . to the end.*

*He noted that first came the date of birth and spoke
of the following date with tears, but he said what
mattered most of all was the dash between those years.*

*For that dash represents all the time they spent
alive on earth and now only those who loved them
know what that little line is worth.*

*For it matters not, how much we own, the cars . . .
the house . . . the cash. What matters is how we
live and love and how we spend our dash.*

*So think about this long and hard; are there things
you’d like to change? For you never know how much
time is left that still can be rearranged.*

To be less quick to anger and show appreciation

*more and love the people in our lives
like we've never loved before.*

*If we treat each other with respect and more often wear
a smile . . . remembering that this special dash might
only last a little while.*

*So when your eulogy is being read, with your life's actions
to rehash, would you be proud of the things
they say about how you lived your dash?¹*

Then I set them free to check the Alpha and Omega dates on tombstones and asked them to discover what they could about the dashes . . . ages, epitaphs, occupations, etc. And as they walked through the graves they were to contemplate their lives . . . their dashes.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus as led his disciples and close friends to the graveyard too. There they will contemplate who He is, the nature of life and death, and how they are to live their dashes.

At this point in the Gospel of John, Jesus has finished his journey back to Jerusalem, and in the aftermath of the triumphal entry into the city he has managed to alienate just about everyone. He has been accused of blasphemy, and threats of stoning drove him across the Jordan River for safety. While he is there, Mary and Martha, his good friends, sisters of Lazarus, send word that their brother is ill. They ask Jesus to come immediately, but he remains several more days. This creates more tension, even if Jesus seems not to be bothered. Finally, when he says to the disciples that they should head back to the city, they think he is crazy, since there were death threats against him. Thomas blurts out, "We might as well go, too, so we can die with him, if that is what he wants." Thomas has said something more profound about their dashes than he realizes, because dying with him is exactly what Jesus has been telling them all along they will need to be ready to do. Following Jesus and living their dash is risky business.

*When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she **knelt** at his feet* (The word used in Greek for "knelt" is not the same as the wise men kneeling in respect and dignity, but rather she fell at his feet with force and desperation) *and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* (If only, if only . . . a game we play often while living our dash . . . if only you had been here, things would have gone differently, the way they SHOULD have gone. But we cannot change the past, no matter how long and hard we fantasize about it.)

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. (The verb for Mary and her companions weeping is different from Jesus' weeping. The word used for him implies angry in spirit, frustration, disappointment, depression. We ask, is Jesus sad, depressed, disturbed, angry, troubled, or all these things? His emotions are motivated by love, but may be more than sadness for his dead friend. He may be looking at the situation humanity is facing, the sin and death of human existence, the very state of affairs he came to live his dash for. He knows he will raise Lazarus. He also knows he will soon be the one to die and be in a grave.)

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He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Those around Jesus assumed he wept because he lost a friend. Many scholars, however, attribute his weeping to the situation around him . . . chaos, suffering, hope of resurrection displaced by the havoc of sin and death. Those who accompanied Jesus to the tomb didn't realize he was weeping not for Lazarus, but for them.

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." (No hope for resurrection there.) Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." (Shows his compassion for the crowd without hope, skeptical at best.)

When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (Called by name.) The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Death stinks. There's no getting around it. But Jesus knows that death is not the end of the story. The story is really about resurrection and the hope it brings. For a moment, imagine what it would be like to be Lazarus, to be completely dead, and then to come alive again! Only after death can we experience resurrection. Imagine waking up in the cave of your death, wrapped tightly in cloth, unable to pull the cloth from your face because your hands are still bound. It's dark, and the stench of your death fills the air you now breathe. Your flesh has stopped decaying but the smell lingers. You hear a familiar voice, muffled, but easily recognized as your dear friend. He's calling for you to come out, but you're not even sure how to get to the door. You wiggle around enough to get up, and you inch your way toward the light. As you struggle to leave the grave, there is a gasp from the crowd gathered outside. They are as shocked to see you as you are to be there to see them.

Then you have a moment of decision. Do you fall back in the tomb or do you venture out into the unknown? What lies ahead is new territory. No one has ever done this before . . . completely dead for four days and now called back to life. In another sense, life outside the tomb is also known territory. The world is a difficult place with jealousy, fears, hatred, and sin. It wouldn't be bad to escape all that. BUT here you are, stumbling forward, and the voice you love says, "Unbind him and let him go." As your sisters and others unbind you, you see Jesus standing there, tears streaming down his face, welcoming you back to life. For this he lived his dash.

Death stinks. There's no getting around it. We can't experience resurrection until we experience death. We can't move into a new life in Christ until we allow our old sinful lives to end. So we must ask ourselves, what is it that entombs me? Here and now . . . not just in heaven. What binds me to death and prevent e from living fully as a new creation? Bindings come in many shapes and sizes in this world . . . greed, jealousy, prejudice, gender bias, fractured race relations, addictions, pessimism, ageism, wealth, superiority feelings, hatred, violence against neighbors, etc. So many things keep us entombed. To whatever stinks in your life, whatever ties you down and keeps you from enjoying the new creation God has in store for you, Jesus calls, "Come out of there!" Moment of decision . . . Do you step pout into the unknown or do you fall back into the tomb?

Today in my congregation a baptism is happening. The parents of the child will be reminded that their daughter has died to sin and now has the promise of new life. Like Lazarus, she will head out into the unknown territory.

But she doesn't do it alone. None of us have to go it alone. When Lazarus stepped out of the tomb, sisters and friends were there to help him drop the cloths that bound him. They were there to support and love him. There is something pivotal about living our dash here. Jesus could have made the cloth fall right off . . . but he didn't. rather, he invited others standing there into the miracle. "Unbind him and let him go." By inviting the friends and family of Lazarus to participate in the miracle of resurrection, he draws them—and us—into God's transformative work. God invites them to live their dashes unbinding others from the deaths in their lives.

In the baptismal service, those gathered around will welcome the baptized into the family of God. As one forgiven and loved, the baptized will join in praying for each other, encouraging each other, building each other up as we grow in faith. That's how we live our dashes, participating in the miracles of resurrection, and offer hope to others who haven't experiences it yet.

The Gospel of John includes seven "signs" before the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus that define him as the Son of God, our Savior. Raising Lazarus from the dead is the final "sign" that Jesus is the one they were waiting for.

Yet, the world is still looking for a sign that Jesus is the one that gives hope in resurrection and new creation. As we live out our dashes, may be unbind others in the name of Christ and be all-encompassing signs that say God is with is in Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, the creator of new creations.