I want to tell you about the stole I’m wearing this morning I chose it for our theme of death, not just because it’s beautiful and autumn-y, but also because it was given to me by a parishioner upon the death of her mother. When I wear it, I think of Ann from the congregation I served before you, but I also think of those members here who have died here since I have come to be your minister.

Deaths are very hard on loved ones, including unexpected deaths: The young people, the sudden accidents, or quick progressing diseases. Suicide, violent deaths. Even the most straightforward death, of an aged person at a time that seems to be natural, can bring up very painful emotions.

Grief tests our integrity. Our temptation is to avoid the fullness of the experience. It hurts. We are hardwired to try to avoid pain. And yet the only way to healing is through the pain. Through it. It’s hard. If we try to sidestep it, distract ourselves from it – you’ve heard the advice: keep busy, go on with life, get over it, hurry up, - if we take that advice and refuse to do the grief work necessary, then it will all come back on us again and again and again. Grief lasts as long as it needs to, and always longer than others want it to.

I took these notes on grief years ago when I attended a workshop on grief and depression by psychologist and Unitarian Universalist, John Schneider. His words have stuck with me, as does the framework he uses to for grief work. He has us ask, “what’s lost?” “what remains?” and “what is possible?”

in the words of Maya Angelou,

*that we begin to stop*

*in order simply*

*to begin*

*again.*

We stop to assess things – ask ourselves what’s lost and what remains, in order to begin again, and to ask what, now, is possible.

And though, I suppose, it helps to have a framework in which to guide our process, it is not really strong enough to contain it. We can’t just understand it away. We have to actually be with it, and feel it. We have to watch the “leaves of autumn sprinkle down the tinny sound of little dyings.” Grief lasts as long as it needs to, and always longer than others want it to.

But we grieve about all sorts of things, not just the end of the life of a person. David Eagleman says that “death is not only for humans but for everything that existed.” He writes of the death that comes with the ending of wars, and plays, and the closing of stores. Karl spoke of the death of his life as a Mormon. The incredible change that comes for some, when your core beliefs are challenged and principles at stake. “Leaving the church he had grown up in and dedicated much of his life to was painful. He experienced a lot of anger, frustration and depression. They lost friends and almost their entire social life. Their young children were shunned and bullied. It’s surprising to me that his marriage survived all that change.
Some marriages and partnerships do end and when it happens that can produce tremendous grief. If we’ve not experienced that directly, we all know those who have.

Violence can cause another ineffable death. When touched by violence, that sense of being safe in the world can die. When touched by abuses of all sorts, our very sense of self can die. These deaths are just as real, and we grieve as a result.

I remember preaching nearly a decade ago about the It Get’s Better campaign – do you remember the response to suicides which were brought on by anti-gay bullying? These were homemade videos made by young people and adults who faced bullying and harassment. He, and other survivors of near suicide, recorded these messages and put them on You Tube so that others, especially teenagers, going through similar experiences would know that they are not alone. The message of each and every video is “I’ve been there. I know it’s hard. This moment can feel unbearable. But I’m here to tell you that it gets better.”

It’s a beautiful message for all of us. Because each of us, at one time or another, has been overwhelmed by our feelings of grief in response to events that are out of our control. Of course what comes to mind today is the violence of sexual harassment and domination and sexual violence, the memories which have been stirred up for so many by the recent hearings for supreme court justice Brett Kavanaugh. Just after the vote yesterday a few of us gathered here in this sanctuary to process our strong feelings of grief and anger and rage. We talked of our personal experiences of sexual violence and the feelings of shame and despair that accompany such atrocities and what hope we could salvage in this moment where so many are emboldened to tell their stories, despite the consequences. Despite a president who mocks women who tell truth to power. And still we tell our stories. And we also, necessarily, grieve.

Grief tests our integrity. Our temptation is to avoid the fullness of the experience. Who wants to feel that bad? We are hardwired to try to avoid pain. Turning to alcohol or drugs to avoid the pain, which may serve to temporarily mask feelings, only makes them worse in the long run.

The only way to healing is through the pain. Through it. It’s hard. If we refuse to do the grief work necessary, then it will all come back on us again and again and again. Grief lasts as long as it needs to, and always longer than others want it to.

Then, John Schneider, says, we ask “what’s left?” After we’ve grieved the loss, we assess what remains. Expressed in the lyrics:

*It's not the end*

*You're not out there on your own*

*There's still so much in life to celebrate*
And finally, with a lot of work, and mostly a lot of time, we come to the “what’s next” part of the process.

...your life is like a book

All you got to do is turn the page

There are friends yet to meet,

There are songs to be sung

There are beautiful sunsets

And battles are won

There's love to be found if you just stick around

Don't give up your life has just begun

Grief can be a transformative process – if we do the work, experience the feelings, and come out the other end.

There’s another framework that I’ve found helpful over the years. This one comes out of research on “termination tasks” – things that have been identified by researchers that people who know they are dying do in order to ease or make possible their own death.

I first came across them when I served Countryside Church in Palatine, IL as intern minister when they were coping with the imminent retirement of their minister of 36 years, Ruppert Lovely. From the experience of working with the Palatine congregation, I learned how these termination tasks can help with the little deaths, too – those ineffable ones. In that case, the Ruppert wasn’t dying, but his leaving was certainly a kind of death for the congregation – and they needed some strategies for coping.

The termination tasks are –

- take control of what remains of life
- get affairs in order
- let go of old grudges
- express gratitude

These are tasks we can undertake when we know grief is going to hit. When we know a big death or a little death is coming, and we can anticipate it. It’s not a response to an unexpected death, but rather the acceptance of an inevitable end.
Was it ever less than a treason, wrote Robert Frost,

To go with the drift of things,

To yield with a grace to reason,

And bow and accept the end

Of a love or a season?

We can use these tasks to help us come to terms with an ineffable death as well – I think a good example that most of us have first-hand experience with is the ending of a marriage or partnership. Whether it be the break-up of your own partnership, or your parents’ relationship, or that of a sibling or friend – it’s a death as real as any that existed. And we can think about these termination tasks through the lens of this kind of ineffable death.

- take control of what remains of the relationship – you might become quite intentional again, like you were when you first were dating – because you’re really assessing the relationship all over again
- you put things in order, divide up the goods, get another living space, separate your finances, that kind of thing
- let go of old grudges – well, we spent September together talking about forgiveness and letting go of grudges – it’s important work. Hard work, and important.
- and express gratitude – even when a relationship ends, there is much to be grateful for – especially if you raised children in that relationship – there is much gratitude to be expressed for the joint project of loving a family into being, even as its old form is dying.

That was just an example of using the four termination tasks to help with an ineffable death. “Death is not only for humans but for everything that existed,” writes Eagleman. We talk about retirement, for example, as wonderful – but for some, the loss of identity and purpose at the end of a career can be overwhelming – and these termination tasks can help us work through the grief in order to come out the other end.

Other ineffable deaths can include moving, or your kids moving out, coming out, or illnesses that don’t lead to death, but to a change in lifestyle that is a kind of death to your old way of being.

Sometimes grief surprises us because it accompanies what we think of as happy events – like retirement or the birth of a child. As the parents in the room know, there is great loss that accompanies this little bundle of joy. Loss of sleep, loss of freedom, loss of old identity. Which is not to say it’s not worth it. That’s why asking what’s next and expressing gratitude are also important steps in the process. It gets better.

If it doesn’t get better over time, that’s a sign that it’s not just grief – that there may be a physical reason for your feelings of sadness that requires medical attention. Paying attention to your feelings, includes paying attention to when they’ve gone on too long and are too strong. True grief is the body’s normal way of processing loss – those big deaths, and little deaths too. The more we remember it is both normal and temporary, the better we are able to stay present to it and thereby grow from it.
...Every year

everything

I have ever learned

In my lifetime

leads back to this: the fires

and the black river of loss

whose other side

is salvation,

whose meaning

none of us will ever know....

Mary Oliver is so wise. At the end of the month we will celebrate our own version of Day of the Dead, we’ll create an altar and invite you to bring photos of those who have died who have special meaning for you. You’re welcome to bring items of remembrance of other kinds of deaths as well – those ineffable ones.

It’s good to test our integrity now and again, that’s how we know we’re whole. At every memorial service that takes place, we are reminded that grief is the other side of love. We grieve because we have loved, and because we have loved, we grieve. We don’t get to experience one without the other. That’s how we know we’re alive. Death reminds us to be grateful for life itself.
Benediction

Mary Oliver reminds us that

To live in this world

you must be able

to do three things:

to love what is mortal,

to hold it

against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it,

and, when the time comes to let it go,

to let it go.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.