

Celebrating Dia de los Muertos

By Rev. Duffy Peet

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Those of you who have looked through your Order of Service have likely already noticed that our service today is a bit different than usual. As you can see on the front cover of the Order of Service, our focus today is on the holiday Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead in English. We felt it was important to include some of the common practices that are associated with this holiday in our service. One of those common practices is creating an altar that honors those we are remembering who are no longer living. The table on my far right will serve as our altar this morning. In just a few minutes I will invite all who have brought photos and mementos to bring them forward and place them on the altar to personalize it.

Before we personalize our altar however, I would like to mention a few things about this holiday that are important for us to be aware of. All of us are aware that tomorrow is Halloween. It is also known as All Hallows Eve. All Hallows Eve is a holiday that has roots in the Catholic Church. Those of you who are familiar with Roman Catholic holidays know that the following two days, November 1 and 2, are known as All Saints Day and All Souls Day respectively. Dia de los Muertos is also celebrated on November 1 and 2. It would be easy to assume that Dia de los Muertos is simply a regional version of how All Saints Day and All Souls Day are celebrated. It would be easy to assume that but it would be an incorrect assumption.

While Dia de los Muertos coincides with All Saints Day and All Souls Day, the holiday actually has its origins long before Christianity existed. Historians tell us that the holiday goes back at least four thousand years on this continent. The Aztecs were holding festivals celebrating the deceased for nearly two and a half centuries before the Spanish arrived in the country we now call Mexico. Notice, I said the Aztecs were “celebrating” the deceased. They weren’t just remembering them. They weren’t just honoring them. And they weren’t mourning them. The Aztecs believed that the dead would want to be celebrated. So that is what they did. They celebrated the dead with a festival that went on for a month. This practice, along with the belief the Aztecs held in the cyclical nature of life and death, made it possible for them to move beyond what is commonly considered to be the natural fear of death.

When the Spanish vanquished the Aztecs in 1521 the celebrations changed. At that time Spain was a decidedly Roman Catholic country. The conquerors did all they could to stamp out this ancient festival as well as the beliefs that were its foundation. Thankfully they were only partially successful. So today, nearly five hundred years after the Aztecs were conquered, the celebration of the dead continues. It continues with festivities, with food, with song and laughter, and with appreciation and joy for those who have come and gone from this life. This is the perspective I would invite us to seek to emulate as we will begin to personalize the altar. May we remember and feel joy for those who have blessed our lives with their presence and who have left us with loving memories.

Prior to our service you were invited and encouraged to bring photos and mementos of those who have special meaning to you and are no longer living. These photos and mementos are what will both fill and personalize our altar today. Shortly I will invite you to bring these items forward and place them on or in front of the altar. The area up here is not very large so I would offer the suggestion that only a few come forward at a time in order to reduce congestion. We will take the time necessary to allow everyone the opportunity to place

what they have brought on or in front of our altar. I invite you now, when you feel so moved, to come forward and place a photo or memento here at the altar.