

What Do You Want On Your Tombstone?

October 25, 2026

A number of years ago, Tombstone Pizza ran a commercial with a question that was hard to forget: “What do you want on your Tombstone?” They were selling frozen pizza, of course, not offering funeral planning advice. But once you get past the punchline, it’s a question worth considering.

What do you want people to say about you when you’re gone? What would you hope they remember? What kind of mark do you want to leave on this world? Memorial Sunday seems like an appropriate time to ask. Today, we will speak the names of people who have died in the past year, many whose lives were woven into the life of this congregation and whose absence we continue to feel.

Some of us are carrying grief that is still tender and raw. Others have found that the years have softened the sharpest edges of loss, even as certain memories can still catch us by surprise. Today is about making room for grief, remembering those we love, and trusting that death does not get the final word about the meaning of a life.

Psalm 90 reminds us that our lives are like grass that springs up in the morning and withers by evening. Our years pass quickly. We are creatures of dust, held within the vastness of time. We spend so much of our lives trying to make ourselves permanent. We build reputations, establish careers, raise families, and work to make a difference. We want our lives to count for something.

Yet none of us gets to stay forever. The people we love die. The things we build eventually pass into other hands. The psalmist asks God to teach us to number our days so that we may gain a wise heart. Numbering our days is not about becoming morbid. It is about recognizing the preciousness of the time we have. It reminds us that a life is not measured simply by how long it lasts or how many people know our name. A life is also measured by what it gives: the love it offers, the burdens it helps another person carry, the courage it lends someone who is afraid.

The psalmist prays, “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands.” The prayer is not for endless days, but rather that what we do with the time we have might become something of lasting value.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is asked which commandment is the greatest. His answer is so familiar we may barely even hear it: Love God with your whole heart, soul, and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. Everything else, Jesus says, hangs on these two commandments. Not our accomplishments. Not our status. Not our ability to get everything right. Love. This love is not simply the warm affection we feel for people who are like us, but love as a way of being in the world. Love that shows up. Love that makes room. Love that refuses to accept that anyone is disposable.

Think about the people we remember today. Perhaps you remember someone who could make you laugh on a terrible day. Someone who noticed when another person was struggling. Someone who stood beside you during a difficult season or made you feel that you belonged. The people we love leave fingerprints on our lives. Sometimes we recognize those fingerprints years later, when we catch ourselves passing along wisdom we once received from them.

Their lives are interwoven with ours. Remembrance, then, is more than looking backward. It's a way of carrying love forward.

In her book "Sage Warrior," Sikh American activist and spiritual leader Valerie Kaur offers a vision of strength that does not require us to harden ourselves against the world. She explores the reality that wisdom and courage are not opposites of tenderness. They grow from it.

That is an important distinction in a world that so often equates strength with invulnerability. We are told to toughen up, move on, and keep going. But the people who have loved us well often teach us something different: that tenderness takes courage, that showing up for someone who is hurting requires strength, and that remaining openhearted in a world capable of inflicting terrible pain is not weakness.

Grief teaches us this, although it is not a lesson any of us would willingly choose. When someone we love dies, we discover just how vulnerable love makes us. We cannot protect ourselves from the ache without also trying to protect ourselves from the love that gave rise to it. The temptation is to close down, to decide that caring too much is simply too costly.

But what if the answer is not to love less? What if the answer is to let love make us more fully alive?

This is the kind of strength Jesus calls us toward: the courage to keep showing up and the determination to keep making love visible in the world. Every time we offer kindness, we extend the reach of someone else's kindness. Every time we welcome a stranger, we carry forward the welcome someone once extended to us. Every time we stand beside someone who is frightened or alone, we make love tangible again. This is how love becomes a legacy. Not merely in what we feel, but in what we do with what we feel.

The reality of our existence here on earth is that we plant things we will never see fully grown. We begin work we will never finish. We love people we cannot keep beside us forever. And still, we are invited to work. To build. To tend. To love.

That is part of what makes a congregation such a remarkable place to remember the dead. We are a community shaped by generations of faithfulness, where the work of one generation becomes the foundation for the next. We inherit traditions nurtured by people we never met. Their work continues in us. And the work we do today will become part of the inheritance of those who come after us: the welcome we offer, the justice we pursue, the children we nurture, and the neighbors we care for.

None of us can do everything. But each of us can take the love we have received and put flesh on it, action behind it. That is how the work of our hands becomes established. Not because we make ourselves immortal, but because love keeps moving through the world.

Today, we speak the names of those who have died, and we commend them to God with thanksgiving. We give thanks for the love they gave us, the lives they touched, the ways they helped make us who we are. And we trust that the God who has been our dwelling place in every generation holds them now, beyond the reach of our grief.

But remembrance is not just about looking backward. It is about what we do next. What if the best way to honor those we have lost is to become a little more like the people who helped us become who we are? To offer the kindness they offered. To practice the courage they modeled. To extend the welcome they gave us. To carry their love into a world that desperately needs more of it.

The people we remember today cannot do those things anymore. But we can. We can take the love they planted in us and put it to work. We can make it visible in our congregation, our neighborhoods, our families, and our public life. We can refuse to let cruelty have the last word, refuse to let indifference become our inheritance, and refuse to believe that the small acts of love we offer are too small to matter. Because love is never just what we feel. Love is what we do. And when we live it, we become part of something larger than ourselves, something that outlasts our own brief days on this earth.

So perhaps the answer to that Tombstone question is this: May it be said that we loved well. May it be said that we made room for others. May it be said that the world was a little more just, a little more generous, a little more alive with God's love because we were here. And may the people we remember today live on—not only in our memories, but in our actions, in our courage, and in every new act of love we set loose in the world.

Our days are numbered. But love is not finished. Indeed, Paul tells us love never dies.

May God establish the work of our hands, strengthen our hearts for the work still before us, and make our lives a blessing to generations we will never know.

Amen.

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Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17; Matthew 22:34–46
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