

*All Saints Sunday*

November 4, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 11: 32-44)

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 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?"

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." 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." When he had said this, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 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."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I begin this morning with a prayer.

*"God of the generations,  
when we set our hands to labor,  
thinking we work alone,  
remind us that we carry  
on our lips  
the words of prophets,  
in our veins  
the blood of martyrs,  
in our eyes  
the mystics' visions,  
in our hands  
the strength of thousands.  
Amen."*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Jan Richardson, The Painted Prayerbook, "On the Feast of All Saints," <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2011/10/29/inspired-on-the-feast-of-all-saints/> accessed November 2, 2018.

Today is All Saints Sunday. And if there is one thing we learn from this day, it is this: We are never alone. We are never forgotten. We are never abandoned. As Saint Paul put it in Corinthians, "*We are God's holy people, called to be saints with all those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.*" In Christ, we belong to God and to each other.

As I consider what it means to be a saint, to belong to God and to each other, I found the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John helpful. We read a piece of it today. But, unfortunately, we started toward the end and just read the last piece of it. You know, it's kind of like stepping into *Pride and Prejudice*, when Mr. Darcy proposes to Elizabeth the first time. And you're wondering, "Who are these people, and why does she hate him so much?" You need a little background, and so do we. So I'm going to set this up this story for us.

It starts out with Jesus in hiding. It sounds a little weird that Jesus was hiding. But the establishment in Jerusalem had recently tried to stone him. And so he traveled about two days to the east, down by the Jordan, to let things cool off a bit. It would be the equivalent today of, say, going to Colorado.

In the meantime, Lazarus, a good friend of Jesus who lived in the suburbs of Jerusalem, becomes ill. Now, you don't call the family for the sniffles. Right? So, Lazarus was very ill. And Mary and Martha, his sisters, send word to Jesus, saying, "*The one that you love is ill.*" And Jesus takes two more days to decide to go back into the storm. The disciples are trying to stop him, "No. Don't go back!" But to no avail.

When Jesus finally gets to Bethany, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. So Martha comes out and meets him on the road even before he gets to town, and she says, "*If you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" Then Mary joined her, and says, "*If you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" And then we move into this story that we heard today.

We also move into my first reflection on the saints. The saints, who belong to God and to each other, tell the truth. "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" Both sisters say it. It is harsh. It is hard. And it is true. Saints see the world as it really is. And trusting each other and God, they tell the truth. Ours is no pie-in-the-sky kind of faith. We admit that death is devastating; loss is heartbreaking. Losing a loved one to death, or losing a relationship, or a job, or a way of life, or a dream – they bring us low. Even Jesus. Jesus weeps. He is "*greatly disturbed,*" it says. Which means he is angry. He is in pain. Grief is true for Jesus, and it is true for us.

But that is not the only truth, and it is not the final truth. Saints know that after endings come beginnings. Resurrection is real. After death, in time there is life. We see it in God's good creation; we see it in our lives. We wait for it at the end of time. God brings life into death.

Death and grief break us. Then out of brokenness comes life. Therefore, we can look death in the eye. We can care for the dying. We can hold the grieving, and say honestly, "This is not forever." The saints are those who tell the truth about death and about life.

And the saints are those who hope in Christ over time. Notice in this story of Lazarus, Jesus did not swoop in instantly as the hero to grasp Lazarus out of the evil clutches of death. But, in his own time, Jesus brings life. Jesus could have swooped in and healed Lazarus, and left, and gone on to the next healing. Instead, he takes time to make a critical decision. He will raise Lazarus. And this will be the tipping point. This will be the critical event that leads to his arrest, and crucifixion, and resurrection. When Mary and Martha send word to Jesus, their hope is in the immediate. Jesus has a longer view. What he planned couldn't happen in an instant. Hope fulfilled takes time.

The saints of God build on the hopes of their forebears. The dreams, the visions, the prayers of generations. We too often in these days want to fix things right now. We put apocalyptic pressure on a single event, on a single diagnosis, on a single election. We demand that a single person change the world. We want it fixed right now.

Wendell Berry once said, "You want one big solution to one big problem. There has never been such a thing. Only a million, million little solutions."<sup>2</sup>

I think about the hopes of my own forbears: a group of Quakers who left England under persecution. A young woman who left Germany alone, hoping for a better life. A grandfather who worked in a glass factory his whole life, with the dream that one day his son would graduate from college. Small steps. Small hopes. A million, million little solutions.

It has always been that way in God's work with the saints. Sometimes those hopes are thwarted. Sometimes we fail. But, over time, the work of God in Christ is realized.

We, as the present saints, build on the hopes of the saints. Hopes for a world of welcome, of generosity, of forgiveness and reconciliation. A world where all people can be what God created them to be. We are part of that hope over time. We are part of a million, million little solutions.

So, the saints are those who tell the truth about themselves and God. The saints are those who hope in Christ over time. And, finally, the saints are those who are connected to one another. We support each other. We work together on those million, million solutions. Look at the story of the raising of Lazarus. Think of how many people worked together to bring life in this story.

At the beginning Jesus is in hiding, and the disciples are trying to talk Jesus out of going back to Jerusalem. "It's too dangerous." But then Thomas speaks with courage. "Let us go also," he says, "so that we may die with him."

---

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry quoted by Parker Palmer in "the Growing Edge" podcast, episode 1: Finding Hope in Hard Times. <https://www.newcomerpalmer.com/podcasts/> accessed November 2, 2018.

Then there are the people in Bethany, sitting with Mary and Martha in their grief, caring for them. There are those who show Jesus where the tomb is. “Lord, come and see,” they say. There are those who take away the stone – physical labor on Jesus’ behalf. Then finally, after Lazarus is raised, Jesus says, “*Unbind him and let him go.*”

God does not work in isolation. God works through the saints. You, and me, and a million, million others through time, who have done the small things together for the sake of community, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of life.

We are not alone. We don’t work alone. We don’t die alone. We don’t find life alone. We belong to God and to each other. We are a part of the great communion of saints who speak the truth about the world and about God, who trust in Christ over time, and who work together to bring new life.

I want to end with the prayer with which I began. Let us pray.

*“God of the generations,  
when we set our hands to labor,  
thinking we work alone,  
remind us that we carry  
on our lips  
the words of prophets,  
in our veins  
the blood of martyrs,  
in our eyes  
the mystics’ visions,  
in our hands  
the strength of thousands.  
Amen.”*