

“The Stuff of New Life” 
All Saints Sunday - November 7, 2021 - John 11:33-44/B

It has been a couple of hard years for our church, so I want you to all take a deep breath -- and let it go. Take a moment to remember those who we have lost - some pillars of this community are no longer with us - many of our number are now removed from our midst. Every day brings new challenges that require us to dig deeper than we may every have gone before. We are tired. We are ready to be done and we are grieving the losses of our lives, our loved ones and who we used to be. So today we have come together, and we acknowledge - in God's presence - the burden of that collective grief, so that we can begin to let it go - even for just a moment. All Saints Sunday is a good time to acknowledge the weight of all that pain and the toll of the death of those we love and the things we have lost over the past year and a half.

The Isaiah text speaks of death as “the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations.” Death is a global pandemic, and no nation, no people are immune from it. Death casts a shroud that eventually ends every living thing, and we acknowledge that loss on All Saints Sunday. But, we are not here just to mourn our dearly departed. We are here to remember their lives and witness, and to give thanks for their presence among us. We are here to begin Advent's 40th year in ministry from this place. And perhaps most importantly, we are here to once again proclaim faith in the One who continues to hold us - all of this and all of them - in the great communion of saints that stretches across time and space.

Over 30 years of ministry I have found a number of quotes that have just stuck to me, informing my witness. Some of them you may have heard before. The ancient Chinese proverb, *“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”* Or Luther scholar Timothy Lull's, *“It's not our agreement that holds us together, it's the Gospel that holds us together.”* At some point, I realized I was collecting tiny sermons - little phrases that capture God's action in my faith journey and hopefully yours as well. That's when I first discovered, *“God loves you no matter what,”* the best Gospel in miniature ever. Then came *“God loves you better than you love yourself.”* It took a little bit of time to find the third “God loves you” quote - but finally there it was: *“God loves you and there is nothing you can do about it.”*

One day, God gave me one of these tiny sermons as the Choir rehearsed the song “Wings of the Dawn”. The lyric was: *“not even dark is dark to You, the night is as light as the day.”* Made me think about God's point of view, and I wrote: ***“Death isn't death to God. It's the stuff of new life.”*** Today is a good day to spend some time remembering the relationship God has with death, and to be reminded how we might bring new life into facing death ourselves. Hear again part of today's 2nd lesson from Revelation:

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away...See, I AM making all things new.” **God becomes the death of Death. And we can see that “Death isn't death to God...it's the stuff of new life.”**

The gospel story of Lazarus is perfect for All Saints Sunday. Jesus not only raises up Lazarus from being dead, but he also models for us **how** to grieve, and how to share in the grief of others. How did Jesus deal with the death of his beloved friend? How did he react

to the great disturbance in his spirit and being deeply moved? What did Jesus **do**? He wept. He did not respond to the “if onlys,” nor did he offer excuses for his absence or tardy arrival, nor did he try to console them with reasons or theological platitudes. He simply stood with them and wept. He allowed Martha and Mary to have their emotions and their faith at the same time - to ask questions when they already knew the answers - to feel their deep sorrow even as they believed in eternal joy.

Jesus stands with us the same way. When we doubt, when we question, when we cry out at God in anger, Jesus is still standing there. And in his time, he’ll call out New Life. And he will do it through the work of the saints. Do you see the part the people play at this tomb of death? Jesus says, *“Take that stone away!”* then calls Lazarus forth from death into new life, and then **we** all are called to **remove** the obstacles. *“Unbind him, and let him go!”*

In the independent, extremely capable, self-sufficient world that we are trying so desperately to reconstitute, the church stands as an open invitation to the only true relationships – relationship with God, and with God’s greatest gift: his people. Weary, grieving ourselves, frustrated and confused how to take our next steps and yet working to take away stones that block, to untie whatever binds, to let the captives go and be free. THAT is the work of those who follow Jesus. That is the work of Christ’s body, the church. That is the work of all the saints. And we do not do this work alone. *(pause)*

I came across this little parable on social media and I offer it you. If you’ve heard it, perhaps it will become a tiny sermon you will share. The unknown author writes: “My dad has bees. Today I went to his house and he showed me all of the honey he had gotten from the hives. He took the lid off of a 5 gallon bucket full of honey and on top of the honey there were 3 little bees, struggling. They were covered in sticky honey and drowning. I asked him if we could help them and he said he was sure they wouldn’t survive. Casualties of honey collection I suppose.

I asked him again if we could at least get them out and kill them quickly, after all he was the one who taught me to put a suffering animal (or bug) out of its misery. He finally conceded and scooped the bees out of the bucket. He put them in an empty Chobani yogurt container and put the plastic container outside.

Because he had disrupted the hive with the earlier honey collection, there were bees flying all over outside. We put the 3 little bees in the container on a bench and left them to their fate. My dad called me out a little while later to show me what was happening. These three little bees were surrounded by all of their sisters (all of the bees are females) and they were cleaning the sticky nearly dead bees, helping them to get all of the honey off of their bodies. We came back a short time later and there was only one little bee left in the container. She was still being tended to by her sisters.

When it was time for me to leave, we checked one last time and all three of the bees had been cleaned off enough to fly away. The container was empty. Those three little bees lived because they were surrounded by family and friends who would not give up on them, family and friends who refused to let them drown in their own stickiness and resolved to help until the last little bee could be set free. Bee Sisters. Bee Peers. Bee Team-mates. We could all learn a thing or two from these bees.

And from Jesus, who taught us about this way of living, and commanded us to *“take away the stone...unbind him, and let him go.”* Did you ever wonder why Jesus didn’t just do that himself? I mean, he called Lazarus back from death, don’t you think he could have had

the stone roll away by itself? Or those bindings just fall to the ground? Instead, he looked **at us and said**, *“YOU unbind him...YOU let him go.”*

As we say in our prayers, *“for the healing of the world...”* and there is no better place to begin than by us loosing what is binding us and the world around us. We are called, at whatever cost, to stand with those facing stones that we can help roll away; to unbind people from guilt and sadness by unwinding the grief and fear that binds them little by little, day by day; to help them escape from tasks that are life-draining so that they can be free to live in service to their own life-giving calling as saints in light.

And we are called to let loose of the roles that cover us over, layer upon layer, binding us and keeping us from being who we were created to be; causing us to lose sight of the primary role we were given in our Baptisms: Child of God. The Body of Christ. A Saint - someone who is unbound from death; let go to live a new life. All of us, from the font on, are called to this: *“take away the stones... unbind them, and let them go.”* Our fear of death is really a fear of the unknown. But trust in God - for whom *Death is not death, but the stuff of new life* - of different life, of resurrected life. And then, with all the saints, proclaim the sure promise of God, ***“See, I am making all things new.”*** Amen, Lord Jesus. May it be so.

And so, we remember today those who have entered the Church Triumphant since All Saints Sunday 2020, who have walked right through death into new life, into the very heart of God. We remember today:

(Read the All Saints list with the tolling of the bells.)

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Resources: “Wings of the Dawn” by Linda Spencer, Hal Leonard Music; “Unbind Him and Let Him Go” PS Sermon 2006; Kathryn Schiffendecker, Working Preacher.com; Bee story was a St. Alban’s Episcopal Church post on Facebook; Author unknown.

