

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
November 4, 2018
John 11:1-45

“For All the Saints”

On the first Sunday of November for more than a thousand years, the Christian church has remembered and given thanks to God "for all the saints who from their labors rest", as the great hymn says. While it's traditionally a time to remember someone who has died, it is also appropriate today to honor anyone whom we love and who brings us great joy.

Because all Saints Day is just that, All Saints Day, not Some Saints Day. Not stained-glass window saints day, but all saints day. The saints in my life and your life – parents, spouses, brothers or sisters, friends and mentors, grandparents -- they are the ones we celebrate today because they are the people who loved us and whom we love in return; who nurtured us and taught us and continue to inspire us.

One of the best ideas about All Saints' Sunday I ever heard – which I've shared many times before and now share with you -- is that our lives are like a big, gracious house, with a front lawn, pillars, and lots of rooms. We have a dining room where we eat, a bedroom where we sleep, a parlor where we relax, a basement where we store our stuff. Carlyle Marney, the Southern Baptist theologian who originated this metaphor, said that on the outside of the house that is our life, is a balcony, and on that balcony are our saints, the ones who taught us and nurtured us and disciplined us and inspired us. Our parents and grandparents are up there, and so are people whose work we admire and aspire to complete—people in the generations before us and people all the way back in history. On All Saints' Day, Marney said, you ought to go outside and look up at your balcony and wave at the people up there. They are your saints. And so today, we do just that.

As I reflect on my own saints, I think of my parents and grandparents – as well as friends who have encouraged me and faithful people who have mentored me. There are so many saints in my life, I'm not sure I could narrow it down to just one. I have truly been blessed by their presence and love, their friendship and support. On a day like today, I'm acutely aware that if it weren't for them, I would not be who I am today or where I am today.

All Saints Day reminds us that none of us have gotten where we are on our own. That the myth of the self-made man is just that . . . a myth. That we all stand on the shoulders of someone. That no one goes it alone.

About this time 8 years ago, I attended the funeral of a friend, a woman I admired very much. She was one of my saints. At her funeral the minister quoted her as saying:

"I did not get to this place on my own. God had carefully prepared the way for me. Each mentor/ friend/ professor/relative seemed to have been hand chosen by God. Each person had a part in God's plan to guide and love me . . . All of these people -- all of these relationships -- were a part of God's plan. God knits us together in relationships -- all of us together here on earth."

My friend knew that we are not in this alone and that we could not be who we are today without the help, love and encouragement of our saints.

And this is why on All Saints Day, we're not only called to remember our saints, we're also called to continue their legacy. In other words, we are called to be saints for other people.

I thought of this as I read the story about the raising of Lazarus, which is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. In fact, it may be the story I've preached on the most.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus were dear friends of Jesus. Jesus often stayed at their home when he was in Bethany and, as his own life comes to an end, Jesus will stay with them every night until his death. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus, which is the only time John names specific people Jesus loved. The four of them were friends; good friends.

Lazarus becomes ill, gravely ill. So Mary and Martha send word to Jesus to come, not only because they want Jesus to know that his friend is ill, but also because they believe Jesus can save him. But when Jesus gets word of Lazarus' illness, he does something odd—he stays where he is for two whole days. One would think that Jesus would drop everything he's doing and run to Lazarus' bedside, but he doesn't. He waits.

When he does decide its time to go to Bethany, the disciples aren't happy about it because it's dangerous there. Bethany is only two miles outside Jerusalem, and Jesus is already receiving death threats. But Jesus sets out for Bethany anyways and, sure enough, when he gets there he learns that Lazarus has been dead for four days. Friends of the family have already gathered at their home and, as people are wont to do in these situations, they've brought food and are trying to say comforting things to the grieving sisters. And they, too, are crying and grieving the loss of Lazarus. Even Jesus cries. "Jesus wept," John writes. It was the shortest verse in the Bible until modern translators started fiddling with the text.

When Jesus arrives at their house, he stands before the tomb of Lazarus—just like the sisters asked him to do, and gives a command to family, friends, and Lazarus: "Lazarus, come out," he says. It's an astonishing moment, because even though Lazarus had been dead in the tomb for 3 days, he comes walking out of the tomb still wearing the clothes in which he was buried.

What a moment! I can only imagine what it must have been like to have been there. What did the people think when they saw Lazarus walk out of that tomb? Did they ever imagine they would ever see anything like that happen?

What do we think? Can we imagine something like that happening? Can we imagine dead places in our lives coming back to life? Can we imagine dead areas of this church coming back to life? Can we imagine what it would be like to have more young people, more baptisms, or fuller pews? And if we can, are we willing to do what is necessary to bring those dead areas back to life with our time and talents and our treasures?

"Unbind him, and let him go," Jesus commands.

Friends, that command is an invitation to all of us to participate in God's work of resurrection, to pick up the work of the saints of this church, to unbind the church, and to live into the future God has planned. But we cannot do those things without your support – your time and talents, but also your treasure, your financial support. The gift of the Foundation that the saints of this church have left to this church provides a substantial amount of support, but it can't provide all of the support, and it shouldn't. We must do our part to continue the work of the saints, the people who have gone before us and labored on God's behalf to build this magnificent church. Some of those saints we're remembering today, others are pictured on the cover of your bulletin – check out that picture of the Session on the bulletin cover!

Friends, think about all of the people here who have offered you a word of encouragement, or taught a class you attended, or stood at the door and welcomed you; think about the people who over and over and over again have told you about God's love by showing you God's love. Those people are the saints of this church, and each in their own way showed up for you, and you're now enjoying the fruits of their time, talents and treasures.

You and I live and move and have our being in a long line of saints who have preceded us. In our time we pick up and do work they began before us. Some of them are on our balconies. Their love and devotion, their commitment and courage and faith, still influence us and inspire us, and we continue their work. And in time, there will come men and women who will continue the work we have begun. That is the promise.

And so today we wave to our balcony people, and they wave back – and we remember them. But we also continue their legacy, just as people after us will continue ours.

“Unbind him, and let him go!” is both our mandate and marching orders, for the God who answered Jesus' prayer in bringing Lazarus back from the dead, the God who raised Jesus from death, the God who promises us life eternal... this God is

not finished with us yet! And we are the instruments of God's resurrection life, grace, and power here and now.

May it always be so.

Amen.

O God, before whom the generations rise and pass away: we rejoice today in the communion of saints, in the remembrance of friends and loved ones who once walked with us in mutual love. We are thankful for every precious memory of their goodness and sustained by contributions each made to our common life. Our faith that Christ lives brings us the assurance that we are not separate in your boundless mercy. Renew us all in faith, hope, and love; that we may share more deeply the fullness of life with you that is not limited by time or space, or weakness of any kind. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.