

Rev. Anne B. Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Ruth 1:1-18
All Saint's Day

"All Saints Day"

Barbara Brown Taylor says that All Saints Day is one of the heydays of the church year. A party, she calls it, because it reaches us like other services don't, even Easter and Christmas. All Saints Day grabs our hearts with the roll call of names, the bell rung afterwards, and the candles we light. Today brings back memories of loved ones who shaped us and molded us, taught us and loved us.

And so today, on All Saints Day, we reflect on those who have gone before us – our saints. The book of Hebrews refers to saints as "the great cloud of witnesses". I love that image. A cloud of witnesses surrounding us, encouraging us, cheering us on to be faithful in our day, and to run with perseverance the race that is before us. They are our Communion of Saints.

And why are they our communion? Because we believe that they are communing with God; that they are dissolving in gratitude for each other's company at that great banquet where's no more pain, no more crying, and no more sorrow because God is right there, dwelling among them forever.

Today's service is also important because it allows us to grieve and acknowledge our losses, even if those losses were years ago. As I read through all of the names that you submitted, I gave thanks to God for all of them and what they meant to you. So today, we both celebrate their lives and acknowledge our losses.

A loss of someone or something means change, and change -- it's a cliché to say -- is difficult. Change is difficult for a number of reasons, but one of the reasons I think change is difficult is because it means we face a turning point. Turning points are tricky to navigate because we're in unknown

waters. Barbara Brown Taylor says that in these twists and turns of life we “submit ourselves to the unknown and step into the darkness without understanding what it is all about.”

One woman who stepped into the unknown was Ruth. The book of Ruth is not the traditional text for All Saint’s Day, but I think it’s a good one for today. Ruth’s story begins in heartbreak. Naomi, a widow in a foreign land, has lost everything including her husband. She’s left with two daughters-in-law, both Moabites, which is code for foreign and despised, with whom she shares only grief and loss because they, too, have lost their husbands.

Naomi decides to return to her homeland, a choice made out of desperation. The future for these three women is grim, filled with more questions than answers. In world structured around patriarchy and kinship, Naomi sees no future for her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth at her side, so she blesses them and urges them to return to their own families, seeking a chance at a new life.

Orpah, obediently, does as Naomi tells her to do. But Ruth refuses to go, clinging to Naomi with a fierce loyalty. “Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God,” Ruth says.

We’ve idealized Ruth’s commitment over the years, but Ruth’s situation was anything but romantic. She was a foreigner in a foreign land, who willingly left behind her own familiar surroundings, her own language and her own culture to go with Naomi. It was a radical decision, because choosing that path meant uncertainty, whereas returning home meant a secure future for Ruth in her own homeland.

What Ruth does here is saintly, but not because she is powerful or perfect, but because she chooses to love deeply and sacrificially. She lets go of her own comfort, her identity, even her gods, to journey with Naomi and embrace Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God. Ruth’s act is a reflection of the love and faithfulness of God, who never abandons us, even in our darkest hours – which is something we all need to be reminded of when experiencing the loss of someone we love.

But Ruth's story is a wonderful story for All Saint's Day for another reason, because it's a story that begins in despair but ends with great hope. Ruth's story is a powerful picture of how God takes sorrow and tragedy and totally turns them upside down into surprising triumph. How God takes what appears like a hopeless situation and shines light and gives hope in ways that are far greater than anyone can imagine.

And so, on All Saints Day, we honor those in our lives who, like Ruth, have shown us what it means to love courageously and sacrificially but who also gave us hope. Our saints are the people who have been present in our lives when we needed hope the most or have shown us how to hope when hopeless situations have resented themselves. Our saints are the people who have chosen to walk alongside us in love and hope.

On All Saints Day we recognize these saints – not just the famous or canonized saints, but the ordinary people in our lives who have shown us glimpses of God's grace.

They could be your parents, who loved you and encouraged you and whose love continues to be a living force in your life.

Or surrogate parents, or aunts, or uncles.

Or teachers or coaches who gave what they had to give to you and saw in you what you could not see in yourself. They could be people who called you to work hard, to sacrifice, to give, to love and inspired you to reach deep inside yourself, and helped you to become who you are today. They could be your husband or wife who you loved like no other.

On all Saints Day we acknowledge the deep loss we feel while also celebrating that they were a part of our lives.

But All Saints Day also reminds that we, too, are called to be saints for each other. In fact, believe it or not, we already are. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, "The reality is that all of us who have been baptized are already saints,

have already been given our halos, because all it takes to be a saint is to belong to God.... Once you have linked up with Christ's body, once you have been baptized in his name and shared his body and blood, you have everything you need to be a saint. You have your identity, your halo, and a choice: to live as who you are or not."

And so it is that the story of Ruth asks us to consider: who around us needs our companionship, our loyalty, our faithfulness? Who might be feeling abandoned, as Naomi did, and could be in need of a friend to walk alongside them? The saints we remember today have shown us that we, too, can be sources of comfort, hope, and love.

The story of Ruth is not one of perfect people in perfect circumstances but rather of two women who, despite their losses, embody love and hope. Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi is one of the most inspiring acts of love in Scripture. It shows us that the call to be a saint is a call to love faithfully and radically, to choose others over ourselves, and to be present for one another even when it is difficult.

Friends, on this All Saints Day, let us remember that God can bring light even into the darkest situations, and that God often works through the unexpected saints among us. So let us give thanks for the saints who have shaped our lives and reflect on how we might follow their example. Let us be open to loving sacrificially, to accompanying others on their journeys, and to showing the world glimpses of the love of God.

Amen.