

Sermon for All Saints Day
November 1, 2009
Christ Church, Andover

Readings: Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44

This past week was my mother-in-law's birthday – Oct. 27. She died 11 years ago, and yet she is still with us. There are usually a few tears shed on special days like this, reminding us just how much she is missed. And the mere mention of her name – Ruby – evokes her presence in a way that we all feel and recognize in our home. We laugh about little things she did or said, and we remember how much she still influences our lives. She is still, in a very real way – a living presence in our lives.

In the Gospel today, Jesus shows up in Bethany at the home of his very dear friends, Mary and Martha, just days after their brother Lazarus has died. In this story, we see a picture of Jesus unlike any other in the gospels. Mary, of course, is upset that he didn't come sooner. But quite apart from her anxiety, Jesus himself is visibly moved by Lazarus' death. "Greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Jesus begins to weep.

We think of Jesus, don't we, as the model of self-control. Never ruffled or undone by the questions of his adversaries. Always spot on with a response. Never flinching in the face of illness or death. Always the right word to speak when an outcast approaches him, or when his disciples are nervous about the children at his feet.

But here, he weeps. Jesus is overcome by emotion. He loses control. The tears flow, his chest heaves, his voice cracks. His friend has died. Jesus shows just how connected he is to this human realm, when he is overcome by feelings born of a very deep and very human relationship. People standing nearby were moved. "See how he loved him!" they said.

Apart from his own death, this is the most human, emotion-laden picture of Jesus we have.

Jesus is taken to the place where Lazarus has been laid – a cave with a stone lying against it. They take the stone away, and enter. (You might have seen some characters show up at your house last night that looked like Lazarus!) There he is, a dead man lying still, body wrapped in a death shroud, and the stench of death already obvious. Jesus said in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!” And at that time, Lazarus rose up, still bound in pieces of cloth. Jesus tells those present to unbind him. Lazarus is alive!

There are obvious connections between this story and what will happen to Jesus himself not long afterward. It is a story about resurrection. It frames the moment when people’s eyes are opened to a new reality. In this story, the line between life and death is somehow blurred, and a new picture begins to emerge. Life, it turns out, is defined not only by these human bodies, but by something more enduring – something timeless that is not subject to mortality. Jesus pulls back the curtain on the meaning of life and reveals the timelessness of our existence from God’s perspective.

Why does that matter, you ask? Because if we simply live, and then we die, it begins to feel that nothing more than the body matters. “Eat, drink, be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Many people, of course, do live this way. And living this way has consequences – not only for ourselves, but for others, too, and for the kind of world we are becoming. And those consequences are almost always negative.

But Jesus invites us into another way of being. It’s a way that imagines that our lives have meaning beyond the obvious. Beyond the dates of our birth and death. In our celebration of All Saints’ Day today, we remember people who staked their lives on the eternal. People who thought not so much about what was convenient or advantageous to them only in this mortal life, but about what was enduring, what was eternal.

Seven young children are being initiated here today through baptism into a way of life that invites them to live their lives according to a new way of thinking and being, in a way that matters not only for this mortal life, but for eternity. It invites them and all of us to make a commitment to think beyond ourselves, to imagine that we are something more than individuals defined by selfish needs and desires,

who will one day die, and that will be that. But instead, we are invited to live into the fullness of life, as people created in the image of God – an image revealed to us in Jesus’ own very human life. And in fact, we’re also being invited to share in his divinity, by becoming members of Christ’s body through baptism.

These young children join all of us who are baptized today in a covenant – a pact we share – that we will live our lives in ways that matter not only for ourselves but for others, and for eternity. You’ve heard the Native American proverb – to think of the seventh generation when you act, as a way of fostering responsibility and accountability. We’re called in baptism to live and act in ways that bring about the promise of a renewed creation, a new reality that reflects God’s purpose and intention from the beginning.

Did you hear those words from the Book of Revelation this morning? They come at the end of John’s vision – a vision of the final consummation of all things when the world is finally set right. He says, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘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.’ And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’”

“See, I am making all things new!”

Baptism is our sign that something new is in the process of being made. Baptism is a sacrament – and that means that it is an outward and visible sign... of an inward and spiritual grace. In other words, baptism is the sign we receive from God, telling us what is always and everywhere true – that God is in the process of making all things new. God is recruiting us – in baptism – to be signs of and to embody that new life. God is transforming the world as we know it, by calling forth in us new life.

Soren Kierkegaard spoke about this new creation. “God creates out of *nothing* — wonderful, you say; yes, to be sure, but he does what is still more wonderful; he makes saints out of sinners.”

God takes us sinners – and makes saints out of them. Doesn’t mean we’re perfect just yet. But it means we’re called to live as those on whom God has made a claim -- as those whose lives ought to begin to reflect the transformation God is bringing about in our world.

Henri Nouwen, one of my teachers, said about this day, All Saints Day, these words:

"We do not concentrate today on spiritual heroes, but on people who are saints by loving one another, caring for one another, forgiving one another in their normal, everyday lives. We are celebrating the saints among us who do not have haloes above their heads but who, formed and inspired by the gospel, can make the interest of others more important than their own."¹

We’re going to sing a hymn now – I sing a song of the saints of God. I especially like the third verse:

“They lived not only in ages past, there are hundreds of thousands still. The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus’ will. You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea, for the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one, too!”

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Gracias! A Latin American Journal*