

Sermon for All Saints Day Year B

[RCL] Wisdom 3:1-9; Psalm 48; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

All Saints Day is one of the most underrated church holidays of the year. It is overshadowed by its more glamorous cousins, All Hallows' Eve and Thanksgiving, similar to how Holy Saturday gets lost in Holy Week. But All Saints Day can bring us a unique blessing just as Holy Saturday does because they are days that are about how some of the darker parts of human experience can be washed in holiness when they are brought before God.

All Saints Day is so important because it is the one church holiday set aside during the year to tend to our grief. We experience grief on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, but that grief is for the suffering and death of Christ and the grand theological ideas that accompany them. All Saints Day is for us, for remembering the people we loved, who were important to us, who made an impact on our lives and then died and left us behind.

Grief is one of life's most powerful human experiences, and grief is often very lonely. Many of us have awakened on the morning after the death of a loved one and simply marveled at how the sun can rise another day and the Earth can continue to turn after our world has been abruptly destroyed. We are grateful for all the concern friends and colleagues show us, but find it so strange to realize that while they truly felt sorry for us during the time they were in conversation with us or the moment they kindly took to send us a card or email, this event that turned our world upside down really meant very little to them.

We're not angry at them. Of course no one would love or care for or agonize over our departed loved one the way our own family would, but it is just so surreal to realize that after someone says something kind to us about it, that person will go right back to thinking about what to put on the dinner table or whether to go to the movies that weekend. It is a realization that all of us have at some time or another that our own personal battles and tragedies and defeats really matter very little in the big picture of the world.

They matter very little 364 days a year in 99.9% of the places on this Earth. But our grief does matter on this day, in this place. On All Saints Day, in God's Holy Church, the losses that we have borne over the years come front and center and are named for all to hear, on holy ground. On All Saints Day, our grief is no longer lonely and isolating, but we gather in this sanctuary and let our grief bind us together in a new and powerful way.

All Saints Day is an important ministry to us in our losses because it helps us reenter that place of mourning in a rhythm, year after year after year each November. As the green and life of the summer die and go to their winter rest around us, so we bring up the pain of loss on purpose in this rhythm, year after year. And each year that we revisit the loss, the pain softens and loses a little sharpness, begins to go to its own winter rest. Every time we name our loved ones among the saints, we honor not only their lives but our own long battle with memories both painful and joyful.

And it is so important to honor their memories. Most of our departed loved ones had a funeral to commemorate them. But the funeral happens right after the loss and often our emotions are completely chaotic, not to mention the practical circumstances we are trying to manage. If you have lost someone close to you, either due to sudden accident or long illness, you probably remember the days in the

immediate aftermath as a haze of confusion. There are hundreds of details to attend to—notifying friends, organizing a service, pulling together money for a casket and burial plot, thinking about wills and estates, the volatility of family brought together in a pressure cooker of emotion. Frankly it is often not a time to treasure the memory of the departed. Many grieving families float through the funeral in a sort of disconnected shock.

This is where All Saints Day comes to our aid once again. There is no chaos, there are no arrangements to be made, no being singled out to sit at the front of the church in a black suit or dress, no finding directions to the cemetery. We are all in this together, and the ones we are remembering are long settled in their resting places. It's the chance to be private about our grief, taking out our memories in the quiet of our hearts and turning them over one by one, taking our time to remember and reflect. But we all enter that sheltered and quiet heartspace of our own at the same time, in the same place. As you bring up the faces of your dearest departed before your mind's eye, cherishing the chance to do so peacefully and uninterrupted, your neighbor is doing the same. We enter the valley of the shadow of death together, and walk through it in solidarity with one another.

There is someone else who is in solidarity with us in our grief, and that is Jesus. In our gospel today, we see him in the exact situation we have faced in our own lives—the inevitable but painful death of a loved one. Lazarus had been sick, they all knew there was a possibility he might die. But even Jesus can't quite believe it at first. He doesn't want to believe it, and asks if he's been buried, hoping maybe the message has gotten twisted along the way and Lazarus is still just sick. "He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep."

Jesus sees so much pain in his lifetime, and he bears it so bravely. He sees the suffering of his people crushed under the imperial rule of Rome, and he doesn't cry. He sees five thousand hungry and poor on a hillside needing him to feed them, and he doesn't cry. He sees people tormented by demons, bleeding or paralyzed or diseased for years, and he doesn't cry. He continues his ministry and cares for them.

But here, at last, he breaks, and for the simple, everyday loss of a simple, everyday beloved friend. Nothing grand or dramatic. One of his best friends gets sick and dies, and Jesus weeps. And so perhaps on this day of letting our heartaches step out into the open on holy ground, we can be in solidarity with Jesus as much as he is with us. He always bears the burden for us. Maybe today we can say, "Jesus, we understand how you feel. We're sorry you lost your friend. We love you. Come be with us for a while and we'll all be in this together."

Jesus brought his friend back, just as on the final day we will all be brought back to life by him to live with him and in him. And how did Jesus raise Lazarus up to new life? How did he bring him back from the dead? By calling his name. "Lazarus, come out!" Today, we're doing the same thing. We're calling out the names of the ones we loved who have passed on, and they answer. They are resurrected in our hearts, brought to life in this time and place. Whether on one side of the border between life and death or the other, we all want to be with our loved ones. As the communion of saints joins spirits across the divide today, we may realize that we are being called by name today as well, named and loved by the ones who have gone before us.

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