

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, October 30, 2022
All Saints' Sunday
10am

Texts: Proverbs 3:29-30 & Ephesians 1:11-23 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Today we observe All Saints' Sunday. The lectionary (a three-year cycle of Scripture lessons) gave us the option this year of observing All Saints' Sunday today or next Sunday, November 6. We chose today because it puts the observance closer to the actual feast day of All Saints, which is November 1. All Saints is part of an ancient triduum in the church called Allhallowtide: a trinity of feast days that begins on All Saints' Eve (Halloween), continues through All Saints' Day, and concludes with All Souls' Day on November 2nd. This period in the church calendar is set aside for remembering all faithful departed Christians.

As a child, All Saints felt like an afterthought compared to the excitement of Halloween. But as I have matured, the personal and theological meaning of this day has grown richer for me. Today we light candles in memory of the saints in our lives. Each candle we light is part of what Pope Benedict XVI called the "great luminous wake with which God has passed through history." He said, "Here is a force for good that survives through millennia; here is truly light from light."¹ Each candle represents the light of God made manifest in the lives of those who went before us. We especially remember today members of our fellowship here at Community UMC who have passed into glory since we last observed All Saints.

The Letter to the Ephesians defines a saint as one who has set their hope in Christ. In Greek 'saint' means 'holy one' - someone who has been set apart and dedicated to the service of God. Ephesians describes all those who have heard and believed the good news of salvation as saints. A saint is someone who hears the Gospel, responds in faith, and allows that good news to transform the way they live their life.

¹ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/pope_benedict_xvi_586424

When I think of a saint in my life, I think of my great-grandmother Wilna. The family called her Will, but I called her GG. When I was eight, she moved with my grandparents to Spokane and I had the privilege of seeing her every Sunday at church. I still remember her beautiful smile, how soft her skin was, and how she always smelled of baby powder.

A few days before she died, my grandmother asked GG if she was afraid. “No, I am not afraid,” she said. “I am ready to go home to Jesus.”

GG was certain of the joy that awaited her on the other side. With the eyes of faith, she could see the beautiful inheritance God had prepared for her on the other side of death.

Ephesians declares that a saint is set apart not only by their faith in God, but even more so by their hope in the finality of God’s kingdom. Saints know and trust that Jesus is sovereign over all things – that Jesus holds “all rule and power and authority and dominion.” There is no power in the cosmos that can stand between a saint and the good news of salvation – not even the power of death.

Is there evil and injustice afoot in this world? Yes. Is there pain and suffering and tragedy? Yes. Is death still a reality? Yes. But Christ is *already victorious* over these things. God raised Jesus from the dead, and then gave him dominion over all, including death. God’s resurrection power has flooded the universe and it fills all things. It filled the lives of the believers before us, and it fills us, too. We do not need to be afraid of death because our hope is in the One who overcame death and will raise us to eternal life.

I was eleven years old when my GG died, but even now, when I am confronted with the reality of death, I think of her words. I think of the faith with which she lived her life and the hope with which she died. She was a lifelong Christian and Methodist, and she was confident of the inheritance she would receive through her faith in Jesus – the inheritance of eternal life.

We have been promised the same inheritance. We are inheritors of the faith, hope, and love of the saints that have gone before us. We are also inheritors of God’s promise of resurrection. The risen and ascended Jesus is proof of our inheritance, and the Spirit’s loving presence in our lives testifies to such.

Think about a saint in your own life. Perhaps they are still alive, perhaps they have long since passed. Think of their words, their actions, the way they live or lived. What about their life gives you hope? How do they inspire you to believe? How do they inspire you to act?

[pause]

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, believed that a saint's actions are guided by three rules of faith: 1) Do no harm; 2) Do good; 3) Stay in love with God. These are the General Rules of The United Methodist Church. They reflect our understanding of Jesus' ministry and our call as Christians and Methodists to fashion our lives after Jesus' example. For the next four weeks, as we celebrate our Methodist heritage and prepare to consecrate our giving pledges to God, we visit once more these three rules. Today we begin with the first: Do No Harm. We are a people that strives to do no harm. This is part of the legacy of faith that has been handed down to us as followers of Jesus and as friends and members of this Methodist congregation here in Coeur d'Alene.

Here at Community UMC we especially cherish the values of inclusion and hospitality. These values reflect our Methodist rule of avoiding doing harm to our neighbors. We strive to see all the people – to see our common humanity and our interconnection as human beings.

Now, let us be clear: There is nothing passive about doing no harm. To do no harm is to accept that we are responsible for each other; we are our neighbors' keepers. Every day we must demonstrate through our words and actions the reality of Jesus' prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of God is the *kin*-dom of God, a place of familial connection. We are connected to our siblings in Christ not by blood but by spirit. And that spiritual connection is cross-shaped: We are connected vertically to the saints in heaven and horizontally to our neighbors here on earth – those we see but, crucially, those we do not. Our choices and actions have ripples beyond our immediate sphere of influence. This is the reality of our multicultural and interwoven world. When we *do* commit harm or allow harm to continue, no matter who is being harmed or where in the world that harm is happening, we are harming members of our own family. We are also damaging the legacy of faith that has been handed down to us.

On the other hand, we seek to do no harm by raising our awareness about the ways our choices and actions affect others and take steps to eliminate systems of harm in world, we honor the faith of the people who have gone before us. We become co-laborers with them in the kingdom of God, extending the compassion and fellowship of Christ to our neighbors. We build upon the legacy of faith that we have inherited until the day arrives that Jesus' prayer is fulfilled, and heaven is at last come to earth.

[pause]

It is good that we do not labor as disciples alone. Heaven labors alongside us. I give deep thanks for this heritage of connection and all the times that I have felt the mystical bond that hold us together across time and space. There is one memory in particular that returns to me at this time of year, when the veil between this world and the next is at its thinnest.

When I was a chaplain intern, I was called in the middle of the night to the ICU. I got dressed and walked across the hospital as quickly as I could. A nurse met me at the door and informed me that the patient inside the room was moments away from death. She was the matriarch of a large, African American family. They were all gathered around her bed in various stages of grief.

I had never ministered to an active death before, only to the aftermath. As the nurse guided me into the room, I felt paralyzed by indecision: What do I say? What do I do? All I could think was, *No one taught me how to do this!*

My panicked mind settled on that reliable Christian practice: prayer. I invited the family to join hands with me around the woman's bed. And then I prayed. I don't remember what I said and truthfully, it's not important. What is important is that as we prayed, the Spirit of God was present in that place. She was running like a current between our linked hands, she was filling the space around us, she was in every inhale and exhale from the dying woman. And as we said 'Amen,' our prayer ushered that woman into eternity.

[pause]

Today we recall that the distance between this world and the next is a single breath. I am convinced that there was more than just the living in that hospital room that night. There was a whole heavenly host at our backs, praying with us.

We stand here, on one side of the veil; those that have gone before us stand on the other. And in between stands Jesus. He stands at the center of a great chain of believers – the link between all who have preceded us in the faith and all who are yet to come.

Even now, the saints who have gone before us are at the heavenly feast. And they are graciously saving each of us a seat at God's table! Every time we celebrate communion, we share the bread and the cup with the saints in heaven and we get a delicious foretaste of a future where we will all feast together. This is what it means to proclaim the communion of the saints, a mystical connection that transcends time and space and division and even death. And just as someone in heaven is saving us a seat at the table, we are called to do the same for our neighbors.

In a moment we will remember those among us who died this past year. Most of those names are known to me by reputation only; you may not know all their names, either. But even if we did not know them personally when they were alive, we are still connected. We are connected by virtue of our faith in Jesus. We give thanks today for the example of faith, hope, and love that they have bequeathed to us. May their memory be a comfort, an encouragement, and a reminder always of the inheritance God has promised us.

Amen.