

Sermon for November 4, 2018

All Saints

“We're Different”

John 11:32-44; Revelation 21:1-6

We are different! Christians are not the same as the people of this world. Surely we all start out the same. We are all born as helpless infants. In need of constant care and protection. Unable to do anything for ourselves. We are all born into a hopeless condition. We are born into a world that is in slavery to sin and death. We all experience the agony of separation from God. We all experience the pain of separation from loved ones. Like all humans we experience death. Both the little ones and the big one. The death of loved ones and eventually our own death. Being helpless and hopeless are the universals of the human condition that all people face at one time or another.

So what makes us so different, could it be that we are saints? According to the Christian tradition and language we are the saints. We are the citizens of God's kingdom. We are the ones who have washed our robes in the blood of the lamb. (Rev. 7) In that sense we are saints, but in a very real way we are no saints. We sin. We hurt others needlessly. We cause ourselves pain. We forsake and abandon our God. True we are forgiven, and I hope that by the power of the Spirit we Christians are a little more loving and faithful than the people of the world. Despite that forgiveness, we are by no means what most people mean by a saint. We are not perfect. Not yet anyway.

So how are Christians different? I believe it is a matter of perspective. Perspective is important. The point of view or vantage point from which we see life shapes how we live life. Christians are different because we have a unique perspective or vantage point on the common situations that all humans face. When we come to know Christ our perspective on everything is changed.

Knowing Jesus changed Mary and Martha's perspective. When their brother, Lazarus, died, their world was turned upside down. As women without husbands in a patriarchal society, their brother had been a source of security for them. He was their source of legal recourse. He was their voice in the face of injustice. He was probably their source of financial stability. But more importantly they loved him. He was their flesh and blood. They had lived with him all their lives. They had served him, and he had protected and provided for them. All of a sudden he was gone. They were devastated. Where was God's glory then?

Four days after Lazarus' death, Jesus came to see them. Martha the practical one came out to meet Jesus while the emotional Mary went to the tomb to weep. When Mary saw Jesus she ran to him and knelt at his feet. And she said, "Lord, where were you? Lazarus died four days ago. Like some incompetent Physician you were out on the golf course while Lazarus was on his death bed. And now you have the gall to come visiting after the funeral. If you had been here you could have saved him! I believed in you Jesus." Jesus said "Where is he buried." When they showed him he cried, and he said, "roll the stone away." But Martha tried to stop him, "Jesus he has been dead four days his body has begun to decay. Mary has been through enough don't put her through this too." Jesus replied, "I told you before if you believe you would see God's glory. So believe and see."

Then Jesus prayed to God and raised his voice and he said, "Lazarus, Come forth." I had a Sunday School teacher who used to say that Jesus said Lazarus name first for a reason. She said that if Jesus had said "Come forth Lazarus," then all who had died would have risen in the pause between pronouncing the word "forth" and the name "Lazarus." Jesus had to specify who was to rise or else all of creation would have thought he was commanding the resurrection of all who had died. I don't know if that is true, but it raises an important point. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he was demonstrating on a small scale what God will do in the end. Just as Jesus had called Lazarus back to life, he will one day call all back to life. So Lazarus came forth and Mary and Martha saw the glory of God revealed. They had been mourning over their dead brother, but with three words Jesus changed their perspective on everything.

I like Mary and Martha. They remind me of myself. Between the two of them they manage to express human emotions in its fullness. How many times have we been as they were. Mourning a death; not necessarily a human death, but a loss of some kind. Part of us puts on a face to meet the visitors. And part of us goes to the tomb and weeps. Most people meet Martha in the road and go on. But every now and then Christ comes down the road and gets beyond Martha and goes to the tombs to weep with Mary.

Then it all comes pouring out: "Jesus why weren't you here, why didn't you do something." The relationship is dead. Words were said that cannot be taken back. The youth and vigor is gone and I am old. Whatever it was that I cherished it is lost. Why weren't you here to save it before it died?

And Jesus says, "Where is it buried?" When we point to the tomb all can see the depth of the loss. It is not just the thing that was lost, the friendship, the youth, or whatever. Part of us has died too. We are buried in that tomb with Lazarus. Jesus weeps with us a moments and says, "Roll that stone away." Then Martha catches up to protect us and she says, "Don't roll the stone away. It is holding back the pain and the grief and the smell of death and decay." Jesus, with a tear still in his eye turns to us and says, "Believe in me and you will see God's glory." Then Jesus raises his Almighty voice and shouts, "Come Forth." And in the blink of an eye all that was dead in us is brought back to life. Just a moment ago all we saw was death and now out of the mouth of a tomb, we see new life.

As surely as Lazarus came back from death, so Christ will come again. Whenever Christ comes into our lives, his glory is revealed. When he comes that final time with all the saints he will make all things new. Jesus will come again and bring a new heaven and a new earth. The old one will pass away and a new one will come into being. This universe with all its evil and sickness all its death will cease to exist. God will make a new creation to replace it. In the new world the full glory of God will dwell among us. There will be no more sorrow. Chains of injustice, chains of poverty, chains of hatred would all fall away. And those who weep will have their tears gently wiped away by the hand of God.

We Christians see life from the viewpoint of the God that is Alpha and Omega, the first and the last. When we face injustice, we can see God's justice coming. When we weep, we can see God's hand preparing to dry our face. And when we view death, we know that the resurrection is ahead. We can look into the mouth of a tomb where others can only see death, and to Christian eyes the glory of life is revealed.

We believe these things, and, like the saints of old, we shall see the glory of God.