

First Trinity Lutheran Church
All Saints Sunday
November 5, 2007
John 11:32-44

Today the Saints of the Past Meet the Saints of the Present

In 2003 Mitch Albom wrote a book called “The Five People you meet in Heaven”. This year a movie was made from the book. This is a movie that if you haven’t seen you have to put on your movies to see list. The story is about a man named Eddie who is a maintenance repairman at an Amusement Park called Ruby Pier. Eddie is a grizzled war veteran who feels trapped in a meaningless life of fixing rides at Ruby Pier which he has done most of his adult life. Eddie now 83 years old has changed from an optimist youth to an embittered man. His days are dull and routine filled with maintenance work that Eddie feels now serves very little purpose in his life. The opening scene of the movie shows Eddie on a normal workday at the amusement park, however it is his 83rd birthday. On this day one of the high coaster rides breaks a cable, emergency workers get the passengers off the car just before the cable snaps and it plunges to the ground. Eddie sees that there is a young girl standing beneath ride as the car begins to fall from the sky. He runs as best he can, although hobbled from a war injury, to push the girl out of the way, but Eddie doesn’t make it and he dies. Eddie awakens in heaven where he learns that heaven is not a lush Garden of Eden but a place where, at least when you first enter, your life is explained to you by five people who were in your life either as strangers you met or as loved ones. Each of the five people Eddie met in his life changed the path of his life in ways that he wasn’t aware of. It is a wonderful story and you really have to see the surprising ending or read the book. What Eddie encounters as this story unfolds is that his seeming dull, monotonous life really had meaning. He made a difference in the lives of hundreds of people. The final scene of the movie shows the amusement park filled with people who were touched by Eddie’s life. Just by the simple

maintenance and repair of the rides at the park as well as the other seemingly mundane things he did really made a difference. At the end of the story Eddie becomes aware that his seemingly dull life really had meaning.

I think this kind of story is important on this Sunday, All Saints Sunday. Today we remember those in our lives who we loved dearly but are now are no longer living. **Today we honor those in our church family who have entered into a new decade and those who are 80 years or older. Today the saints present meet the saints past.** We began this service this morning with the renewal of our baptismal vows as a way to remember where we have come from and where we are going. Even in the everyday world that we live we are all saints. Our lives do have meaning and our life is important to those around us. Yet we don't often think of ourselves in this way. Rather, most often, we think that the life's journey we are on, is not very important, certainly not very exciting, and certainly not worthy of being called saintly.

Today All Saints Sunday is a day in which we remind ourselves that there is a bond between believers who are living and those who have died. In our gospel today, we see this interconnectedness between the living and the dead. We see Jesus the Son of God shining through Lazarus by giving him life after he had been lying dead in the grave for four days, we see the community gathered around Lazarus also mourning his death with his Sisters Mary and Martha. However, before we reach that point in the story, we need to take a closer look at what happens before Jesus restores Lazarus back to life again.

John's gospel picks up the story in verse 32 of chapter 11, where Lazarus' sister, Mary meets up with Jesus, and full of grief and sorrow, kneels at his feet, saying the following words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Are these words not filled with sadness and regret as well as faith? On the one hand, Mary is missing her brother Lazarus terribly. So in sorrow and regret she says, "If you had been here..." Is this not also how we respond to the death of our loved ones? There is a

sadness of the loss of our loved one, a feeling of void and emptiness without them.

Recognition that life is never going to be the same without them. There is often also a feeling of regret mainly due to guilt associated with something we may have done or may have failed to do. IF ONLY I had not gotten into that tirade which upset my loved one and may have brought on his/her heart attack. IF ONLY I had taken that day off to pay a visit and say my final good-bye. IF ONLY I had made more of an effort to reconcile my differences with my father/mother. IF ONLY we had taken the time to plan more for the future and had made a will.

Mary's words of regret here teach us all that we need to live life by making each day count; so that we do not have to be weighed down by the IF ONLYS of life. Mary's words are also a remarkable confession of faith and confidence in Jesus. "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." Here Mary trusts and believes in Jesus, that he actually could have prevented the death of Lazarus had he been around at the time. Here is a trust, a confidence, and a faith that shines through like the beautiful multicolored light of a stained glass window. An incredible faith in Jesus as the giver and restorer of life. We too can learn from Mary's words of a confident faith in Jesus. We like Mary can turn to Jesus in our times of deepest sorrow and grief and seek his grace so that we too might be restored and given a newness of life, a newfound meaning and purpose for life.

It is most interesting how John describes Jesus' response to Mary's words. In verse 33, he says: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." After this description of Jesus' demonstration of emotion, John goes on to tell us that Jesus then asks where Lazarus has been laid, to which those present invite him to "come and see." And then for a second time Jesus lets out his sorrow and grief, John says in verse 35: "Jesus began to weep." In Jesus' humanity he is able, like us, to shed tears to release his sorrow and show

us that he is in solidarity with us. And then, John describes the response of the grieving community, who said: “See how he loved him!” Here John underscores another very significant point—namely, that when we face the death of our loved ones we all need the care, the love, the compassion and empathy of the community. Here is a good example of the communion of saints at work. Death is not something meant to be faced alone, privatized, hidden, or denied. When a person dies we, as a faith community need to draw strength and comfort from one another, just as Mary and Martha drew strength from Jesus and the Jews who were also mourning Lazarus’ death.

As the story unfolds John tells us that again Jesus greatly disturbed, came to the tomb.” And over against the protests of the “stench” of a four-day-old, dead, decomposing body; Jesus orders the people to “Take away the stone.” After a prayer and with a loud cry, he says, “Lazarus, come out!” Lo and behold, that’s exactly what happens! The four-day-old dead man comes out, grave-clothes and all! Then, Jesus instructs the people to: “Unbind him, and let him go.”

This last segment of the story is, I believe, very instructive for us on this All Saints Sunday. It reminds us all that the restoring to life of Lazarus is not only the work of Jesus, but also requires the cooperation of the community. It is the community who roll the stone of the tomb away. It is also the community who unwrapped Lazarus from his grave-clothes. So too, we are who we are as the Church today not because we have made it on our own. Rather, we are who we are today as a people of faith because of the legacy of faith that we have inherited from our ancestors in the faith. There is not a person here today, I believe, who has not, somewhere along life’s journey been deeply influenced by the life of the saints who have gone before us. Whether it’s our parents, grandparents, our neighbors and friends, our Sunday School or other teachers, our pastors or other leaders in the Church—we’ve all benefited from the life and influence of saints. In fact, the saints who influenced us have been the very presence of Christ in our lives.

In our world today, we can all too easily smell the “stench” of death. Death in the fast-paced lives that we live. Death in our obsession with “making it” no matter what, even if that means selling our very souls. Death in the prevalent values of consumerism, materialism, and individualism, which exploit people and the world’s resources without any limits. Death in our hunger and thirst for entertainment, which promotes violence as the means to solving life’s problems. The death of a broken marriage, a failure at work, a starving poverty stricken world around us, like Lazarus we are bound tightly in death’s clothes, grief, disappointment and hopelessness. The list could go on almost endlessly. Thank God that through Jesus and with the support of the communion of saints we are able to live a new, death-free life! We are called by Jesus to unbind the death-clothes of this world and set people free to live a life of love and abundance in Christ.

This connection we have with the saints present and past reminds me of a true story told by Pastor Kay Bessler Northcutt. Nine-year-old Emily Carson was preparing to be baptized and consequently familiarizing herself with salvation history - interrogated her pastor, regarding Moses encounter with God on Mount Nebo when he saw the promised land. This was the land that Moses and Israel spent forty years trying to reach. Moses was never able to enter the new land but he saw it from the distance atop Mount Nebo. 'So,' Emily began questioning Pastor Northcutt. 'Moses was the greatest prophet, right?' 'Right.' Pastor Northcutt answered. 'And he, like, met God but didn't die, which was, like, impossible, right?' 'Right.' 'And he did all those signs and wonders with the pharaoh and the Egyptians and his staff even became a snake once, right?' 'Right.' 'But Moses - who basically did everything right - didn't get to enter the Promised Land?' 'That's right, Emily.' Emily thought for a long while, and then pronounced, 'That is so not working for me. It's about the most unfair story I know.'

Northcutt comments: "What if fairness is not the ultimate issue to be wrestled with at Mount Nebo? What if the view from Mount Nebo is ultimately found in the quest

for the unattainable? And what if the definition of a great life is one that consciously lives (and dies) with the attainable for which one has worked your entire life just is just beyond your reach? It follows that a single lifetime is not enough for any of us to complete God's intentions for our lives - or for the institutions to which we give our lives. A single lifetime wasn't even enough for one as exceptional as Moses. This one, this Moses, mattered to God. God loved Moses - uniquely, utterly, exceptionally. And a single lifetime was not enough for even this favorite son of God's to accomplish everything. It was left to others to inherit and breathe life into what Moses and God had begun. Reinhold Niebuhr beautifully captured Mount Nebo's wisdom when he noted, 'Anything worth doing cannot be accomplished in one lifetime.'

Can anyone complete God's intentions for their life? Because of our weaknesses and sin, our **reach** will always exceed our **grasp**. No one is noble enough; no one has enough years to accomplish every goal and dream. When we are young, this does not occur to us. In our youth, all of life with all its possibilities stretches out before us. We feel immortal and everything seems possible. But then the years pass – not quickly, but constantly. Our children grow up and we grow old. One by one, options close and life seem short, given all that we hoped to do and see. The unattainable must be sought by generation after generation that comes after us. The greatness of life is trying to obtain the unattainable. And as life goes on the quest for the unattainable is left to those who will come after us. And so the story continues, generation after generation. It is here that the saints of the past meet with the saints of the present. This is why because of God's grace and love we are all saints. Amen.