

November 5, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church – All Saints' Sunday

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

***Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion
and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord...
Collect for All Saints***

Retired U.S. Navy Admiral James Stavridis was interviewed on National Public Radio a few months ago, as part of a tour to promote his latest book about the role of our world's oceans and seas in international politics. He talked about his life as a naval captain, much earlier in his career, and how he too often foolishly insisted on bringing the ships he was handling into a harbor, all by himself, without drawing on the use of tugboats. Keep in mind that the ships he was trying to dock are anywhere from 500 to 1000+ feet long. Stavridis recalled how many times he banged his ship – hard – on the pier in Pearl Harbor. He said his actions flew in the face of the wisdom he'd been taught by one of his mentors, Admiral Ernest King, who said that, “the mark of a great ship handler is never getting in a situation that requires great ship handling skills.”

This advice, he said, was as much a metaphor for life as it was instruction about the best way to dock a destroyer or an aircraft carrier. The advice was about drawing on the strengths and resources of those around you, your community, letting them do what they can to help you in a time of need, because no one can go it alone. *Nothing* is designed to go it alone. Even a big, mighty ship, with the power to wage war and sail through the roughest seas, can be stymied by making its way into port, and needs to rely

on a tiny little tugboat to get the job done – *safely*. (interview by Steve Inskeep on June 6, 2017, NPR's *Morning Edition*)

Nothing – no one – is designed to go it alone.

Our opening Collect makes that fact clear, as well, reminding us that we are not solo creatures, but ones that God, out of love, has knit together. And while that is true every day, we set aside the celebration of the Feast of All Saints each year, to specially recognize this immutable reality. Our lives are bound together and intertwined – not just with the people in our family or with others in this room, but with everyone everywhere. We are bound even with those whom we see no longer, the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us.

Later in the service, we will be reading the names that you all have submitted, of loved ones who have died: parents and grandparents, friends and co-workers, spouses and children. We will pray each name separately, one at a time, because there is something special about a name, about being called and recognized as the one and only you. We give voice to those names in the context of worship not only to remember them, but to proclaim and give witness to the sacredness of each person: God knows their name, God loves them, and God blesses them.

We say, aloud, the names of those who have gone before as a reminder for the living, that each of us, too, is unique and valuable. God knows our name, God loves us, and God blesses us, as well.

If you want to silence a person, diminish them, make them less than human, take away their name. Refer to them collectively – you know, *those* people. Strip them of their name and tattoo them with numbers, like millions were namelessly identified in places like Auschwitz and Berchenau.

Maybe part of what it means to be building and revealing the kingdom of God on earth is living our lives in such a way so as to learn the names and honor the connections we have with one another. Continuing the work God has started, of knitting us together; and sin – the things we do to one another that dishonor or diminish or ignore our interconnectedness – is what tears God's knitting apart.

Nothing – no one – is designed to go it alone.

There's a story that's only very recently come to light: as it was written about in the New York Times, the story was referred to as the Lost Children of Tuam (“chewm”).

The article profiles a facility in Tuam, Ireland – what once had been a workhouse for the poor and destitute – that served as a kind of orphanage or foster home for the children born to unwed mothers. It was called the St. Mary's Mother and Baby Home – or, for short, The Home, and it operated from 1925 thru 1961. Mothers-to-be would come to the Home, give birth to their children, stay for a year as unpaid workers, and then be kicked out; because they weren't married, they weren't allowed to take their babies with them.

Catherine Corless grew up in Tuam, in the 50s, and passed The Home every day on her way to school, giving it a wide berth. She was taught to avoid the Home Children, too, who went to the same school as Catherine, but who were treated as second (or third or fourth) class citizens, rarely getting any of the teacher's time. The Home Children were dirty and disheveled, often sickly, quite evidently uncared for. Ms. Corless recalls a time when she and a friend taunted two little girls from The Home by fashioning an empty candy wrapper to look like there was something inside, and offering it to them. The little Home girls grabbed at the candy eagerly – it was the kind of treat they would normally not have the opportunity to enjoy – while Catherine and her friend just stood and laughed at the girls' disappointment at finding nothing inside.

Many years later, after her mother had died, Catherine discovered that *her* mother

– who'd been an extremely secretive, quiet, and withdrawn person – had been one of these Home Children herself, conceived by an unmarried mother. She carried the shame of that with her all her life, and never spoke about it to anyone.

And so, fueled by these two things – her mother's secret past and her own cruelty to another child – Catherine Corless began to pursue the story of Tuam's Mother and Baby Home, chasing down the rumors that were rife in the town, part of the local lore. One of the oft-told stories was about a stash of bones found in an underground storage shed, a septic tank, on the edge of the land where the Mother and Baby Home once stood. The rumors turned out to be true, and the bones were discovered to be the bones of infants and children. No gravestones, no markers, no listing of the names of the children who passed away far too young from tuberculosis and gastroenteritis, meningitis and undernourishment, at rates much higher than the general population. Catherine worked tirelessly for years, eventually discovering the identity of the 796 children buried in what is essentially a mass grave, because, as she puts it, *Every child is entitled to their name.* (NYTimes, *The Lost Children of Tuam*, by Dan Barry; October 28, 2017)

She wanted to give them back their names, and in quite a few cases, she has been able to track down relatives of the children, families who had wondered for years what had become of their daughter or son, their brother or sister. Catherine gave these children back their names, and she gave them connection – the connection they'd never

had during their short little lives.

We are knit together in one body. *Nothing – no one* – is designed to go it alone.

When you think about the sacraments of the church – Baptism and Eucharist, Reconciliation, Marriage, and the ministration at the time of death – all of them contain some aspect of naming and honoring, restoring and making visible and tangible what God has already knit together.

Today, at the 10 o'clock service, we'll be baptizing a little baby, Leila. We will say her name, over and over, and then we will make formal the connection she already has to all of us. We'll use visible, tangible things – water and oil – to welcome her into this family of God, at Annunciation in Gurnee. We don't do this baptism to make God see her or love her – God has seen and loved her from long before she was ever cradled in her mother's arms. In baptism, we consecrate her, recognize her as the holy thing she already is, and let her know that through the power of God, all the things of her life – the joys and the disappointments, the glorious and the mundane – are all blessed, and inextricably tied up with the joys and disappointments, the glorious and the mundane, of the rest of God's beloved people. And for those of us who have already been baptized, we will renew our vows, right alongside Leila, and be reminded ourselves again that we are knit together by God in common purpose, common love, and common cause, and

enjoined to share this Good News with everyone everywhere.

Because *Nothing* – no great ship and *no one* – no child ever – is designed to go it alone. *Amen.*