

“I Believe in the Communion of Saints”

Dte: November 6, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion All Saints Day

Theme: saints, holiness

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

What a great day today is – All Saints Sunday. Scholars who have read and re-read John Wesley’s journals have discovered it was one of Wesley’s favorite Sundays of the year. And over the years, I think it has become one of my favorite Christian holy days as well. Today we remember the saints of the Church and the saints in our own lives. Today is special.

Both of our Scripture passages this morning speak to us about eternal life. John the revelator speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, a place where God will wipe away the tears from every eye, a time when there will be no more death or mourning or suffering.

Indeed, in Heaven Jesus will make all things new. This is the Christian hope, that this life is not all there is. Heaven is no fairy tale; it is the foundation of our faith. Jesus Christ has conquered death, and to all who put their faith in Him, there is the promise of eternal life. Amen?

In the Gospel of John, the writer recalls the death of one of Jesus’ best friends. You see, whenever Jesus needed a rest from ministry, he would often go to the home of Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. Well, it so happened that Lazarus became very ill and died. Jesus did not get there in time to heal him. Mary, Martha and their friends were grieving when Jesus arrived.

Lazarus had been in the grave four days. But Jesus asks to be taken to the grave-site. When he gets there, the text tells us that he

too joins the others in grieving. Our Lord and Savior cries along with everyone else who loved Lazarus. Death, even for the Lord of Life, is painful when someone you love dies.

However, Jesus is the Son of God. *He* is the Word that John spoke about in chapter one when he wrote, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Through Him all things were made.” Jesus is co-equal with God and He has the power of life and death in His hands.

Jesus calls out the name of Lazarus, and the dead man walks out of the tomb. Who has heard of such a thing? – dead in the grave four days and alive again? Surely this must be the Son of God. Yes, Jesus is who he says he is. And thus, for the Christian, death is not the end, but the gateway to eternal life. Amen?

November 1st is the official day for All Saints Day, but we are celebrating it today. It’s a homecoming of sorts, a day to remember those who have run the race of life, and who have gone home to receive the prize of glory in Heaven.

It’s a day to give thanks for God’s faithfulness in every generation. In every age God is faithful to raise up Christians, who by their lives give witness to God’s love and grace.

Originally, All Saints Day was intended to honor the martyrs of the church, those early Christians who died at the hands of the Romans rather than denounce their faith in Jesus Christ. Later, the celebration was enlarged to include all Christians who had died.

Some time, either in the 8th or 9th centuries, November 1st became the designated day. The veneration of the saints has had a mixed history in the life of the church. For a time it was quite helpful

and useful to recall the heroes of the faith, who courageously stood the test and were willing to die rather than deny their loyalty to Jesus.

But later practices corrupted the ideal. People began to worship the saints themselves instead of Jesus. Relics of the saints were thought to have healing properties, almost in a magical or superstitious sort of way.

Some people began to believe that God was so holy you couldn't talk to God directly. You needed a messenger to carry your prayers to the Lord. And so, some people prayed to the saints, instead of to God.

At the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, it was long overdue to reform the practice of revering the saints. The practice had been abused. Many of the reformed churches did away with anything that had to do with remembering the saints. They taught that only Jesus was worthy of their devotion.

Perhaps they threw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. There is still merit in remembering the saints. All Saints Day is important because it reminds us that we are but a link in a long chain of Christian believers, reaching as far back as the first 12 disciples, and reaching as far into the future as time will allow.

It is so easy for us to think that we are the first ones to believe in Jesus. How tempting it is to think we are the only ones who have struggled with what it means to be a Christian in this time and place.

All Saints Day reminds us that there have been faithful Christians in every generation who have heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and responded. It has never been easy to be a follower of Jesus. We are not the first generation who has struggled with our

conscience about who to vote for, or how to respond to the problems facing our society, or about making moral decisions in our own lives.

It has never been easy to be a follower of Jesus. Being a Christian has always carried with it a struggle, a temptation to doubt, and a clash with culture. But thank God, in every generation there have been Christian believers who have remained faithful.

In every generation God has called forth people to be his witnesses. Without their willingness to answer God's call, where would the church be today? And so, I wonder where and how God is calling you and me to be faithful in our time?

You see, we are not solitary islands in a vast ocean of humanity. We are link in a great human chain. All Saints Day reminds us that we are not alone in our journey of faith. We stand in a long line of Christians who have gone before us.

All Saints Day is not a day to worship the dead. Rather it is a time to praise God for the work of grace in their lives. All Saints Sunday, as every Sunday should, focuses our attention on Jesus and the way He changes lives. If we allow Him, Jesus will make each of us more holy, more like Him. And that is the goal of Christian living, to grow in holiness and in the likeness of Jesus.

We look to the great saints of the church, not to be envious of their good works or their good character. But we look to the saints to see how they allowed God to work in their lives. They were open to the work of the Holy Spirit, so that it changed their lives. In them we can see Jesus.

Oh my friends, this work of a being a Christian, of trying to be a better person, is not something we do on our own. It is the work of

God to transform lives. But God can only transform us if we allow Him. Our work is to be willing.

As we celebrate All Saints Day, let us remember with grateful hearts, that God is faithful in every generation. Let us give thanks for those who have gone before us. And let us open our hearts to the transforming work of God's love in our lives, just as the saints before us.

And all God's people said, "Amen."