

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

November 4, 2018, All Saints' Sunday

Isaiah 25:6-9, John 11:32-44, Revelation 21:1-6a

SAINTS WHO GATHER TOGETHER

On this All Saints' Sunday I want tell you that: You, every single one of you sitting in this sanctuary this morning, are a saint. Each of you who follow Jesus Christ is a saint.

You don't need a halo, you don't need to be Mother Teresa or St. Francis, or Billy Graham. You only need to be yourself, because you are a saint.

You, every single one of you sitting in this sanctuary this morning are a child of God, adopted into the Family of God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Through the gift of grace you are enough,
just as you are,
to be a saint called to follow Jesus in the life of faith.

We are saints who gather here this morning to remember:

To remember our loved ones who have died in the past year.

To remember our loved ones who died years ago, and everyone in between who and are still close to our hearts.

We are here to celebrate lives well-lived, who have helped shape who we are as people, as family, as friends, as a church family.

We gather here together because we saints need to be reminded that "death can't separate us from love."

"Death can't separate us from love" is the title of a wonderful article I read this week. It is the promise Paul gives to us in Romans 8: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

In the article "Death Can't Separate Us From Love" by Pastor Joe Kay from Ohio, he writes: "Those who love us are with us always. They're near, dear, and not-so-departed. They remain an intimate and important part of our daily journey to become more loving people and to build a more just society together. We're reminded that death isn't about destruction or separation; it's a moment of holy transformation that takes us even deeper into life. We trade our heartbeat for a deeper place in the heart of God who is love, a heart that remains active and involved in our world" <https://sojo.net/articles/death-cannot-separate-us-love>

What a powerful picture of what has happened to our loved ones we are remembering today: "Death isn't about destruction or separation; it's a moment of holy transformation that takes us even deeper into life. We trade our heartbeat for a deeper place in the heart of God who is love."

Another pastor, the Rev. Dr. Henry Van Dyke, a Presbyterian pastor and professor of the last century wrote the hymn Ode to Oy among many others and the book, *The Fourth Wiseman*. He has written a picture of this "moment of holy transformation" that has been a favorite of mine since high school. It is entitled: "*Gone From My Sight*."

Gone From My Sight

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship, at my side,
 spreads her white sails to the moving breeze and starts for the blue ocean.
 She is an object of beauty and strength.
 I stand and watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck
 of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then, someone at my side says, "There, she is gone."

Gone where?

Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast,
 hull and spar as she was when she left my side.
 And, she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port.
 Her diminished size is in me -- not in her.

And, just at the moment when someone says, "There, she is gone,"
 there are other eyes watching her coming, and other voices
 ready to take up the glad shout, "Here she comes!"

And that is dying..."

This is the day for those of us on the shoreline saying, "there, she is gone," "there, he is gone,"
 to be reminded that God's power of love holds us always,
 even and especially in death,
 and then in the promised life beyond death.

The Bible passages we read this morning give us such powerful pictures of what God's love
 looks like. In the story of Lazarus we see Jesus weeping at the tomb of his friend and we are
 reminded that we are loved by our God who is with us at a heart level.

We are loved by our God who weeps with us and for us.
 Jesus shows us there is a place for our tears.

In Jesus raising Lazarus from death to new life we are reminded of the new life that is
 promised to each of us, and those who have gone before us into heaven.

In both the Isaiah passage and the Revelation reading we hear God's promise that the day will
 come when there will be no more tears because death will be no more.

It is comforting that God knows the pain of our tears when we say our goodbyes,
 and God promises that the separation of death is not the end of the story.

In Isaiah the promise is made: "God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe
 away the tears from all faces." (Isaiah 25:8a)

In Revelation's picture of the end of human time, we hear the promise of our home with our
 God: "See, the home of God is among mortals.

God will dwell with them;
 they will be God's peoples,
 and God himself will be with them;
 God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
 Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more..." (Revelation 21:3-4)

There was a grandmother named Elsie in the church I served in Minnesota who was nearing death. Very early one morning, a few days before she died, she and her son were talking around 3 a.m. and she said to him: "You know, people wonder if they'll be scared when the end is near. But I'm not scared because someone is leading me by the hand and is taking me to somebody who promises to take care of me."

The promise of God's loving care is for each one of us. It is the promise we hold onto as we entrust those we love into God's care.

Death is not the end of the story, but the beginning of our eternal story. As pastor Joe Kay wrote: "We're reminded that death isn't about destruction or separation; it's a moment of holy transformation that takes us even deeper into life."

One of my favorite poets is Ann Weems. When she died of brain cancer two and a half years ago her poem "When You Hear of My Demise," was sent out to those connected to her blog. She wrote it 6 years before her death. (See end of sermon for full poem.

"When You Hear of My Demise"

When you hear of my demise
Don't believe a word of it!
Our God is the God of the living
And I am living still!
If it were not so
He would have told us!

Don't believe a word of it!
And whatever you do
Please please please
Don't eulogize me!

Gather instead for worship!
To celebrate God
Who gives each of us Life Abundant! ...

...Turn tears into laughter!
Turn sadness into joy!
Turn somberness into celebration!

Remembering that Jesus is
The way, the truth, the life.
Gather to celebrate life with scripture and prayer
With jazz band, with choirs, with pipers, with dancing

Follow with faithfulness the life you have been given! ...
(2010)

We saints, gathered on this All Saints' Sunday are held in the promises of God.
 When that day comes for each of us, and those we love,
 of moving deeper into life,
 when we trade our heartbeat for a deeper place in the heart of God who is love,
 when someone is leading us by the hand and is taking us to our God who promises to take
 care of us,"
 may we say with the prophet Isaiah"
 "This is our God; we have waited for him, so that God might save us.
 This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
 let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation." (Isaiah 25:9a-b)
 AMEN.

I invite you now to remain seated and to turn in the blue "Sing the Faith" paperback hymnals to
 Hymn #2283, *For All the Saints*.

As you'll see in your bulletins, we will sing a verse and then pause to remember the good
 saints who have gone before us.

***Hymn #2283-STF** *For All the Saints*

Sing Verse 1—

Remembering God's saints: Barb Ohlsen, Viola Lyon, Carolyn Ehlers

Sing Verse 2—Remembering God's saints: Patt Fulton, Bev Butterworth, Shirley Belanger

Sing Verse 3— We remember together our family and friends:

Sing Verse 4

Full text:

'*When You Hear of My Demise,*' written by Weems in 2010.

When you hear of my demise

Don't believe a word of it!

Our God is the God of the living

And I am living still!

If it were not so

He would have told us!

Don't believe a word of it!

And whatever you do

Please please please

Don't eulogize me!

Gather instead for worship!

To celebrate God

Who gives each of us Life Abundant!

Turn mourning into morning

Turn tears into laughter!

Turn sadness into joy!

Turn somberness into celebration!

Remembering that Jesus is

The way, the truth, the life.
Gather to celebrate life with scripture and prayer
With jazz band, with choirs, with pipers with dancing

Follow with faithfulness the life you have been given!

I left this earth in Alleluias
Dancing with the angels of life
Among the stars of God.

Ann Weems died March 17, 2016, from complications from a brain tumor.