

TOGETHER WITH THE SAINTS

The Rev. Alex Zuber

As we hear this proclaimed word today, let us join our hearts in prayer...

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is All Saints Sunday, and on this day, I always try to be very particular about my language. This particular Sunday, in congregations around the world, in sanctuaries dressed in resurrection colors, with the light of resurrection shining in our midst... **We acknowledge death.**

I'm particular about my language, because it matters what we call *death*. In his 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation*, Martin Luther first penned his thoughts on what Lutherans know as "The Theology of the Cross". Luther contrasted his theology with what we know as "A Theology of Glory". Luther said, "A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."¹ I'm particular about using the word *death* on this day, precisely because Death is hard, defies God's intent for our world, and it's important to name this truth.

However, I understand that it is a part of the human condition that we protect ourselves from harm. We find softer words to talk about death or distance ourselves from it. We call funerals "Celebrations of Life" or "Homecomings". Folks can call those things whatever they want or need to call them, but as a pastor in those times, you'll always hear me refer to them as a *funeral*.

Other times, we remember those who passed, passed away, or went home. When I worked as hospital chaplain for a summer, I saw the distance medical professionals tried to create from constant death by saying that "the patient expired."

364 days out of the year we protect ourselves. But not today.

Today, we remember those who died.

Today, on All Saints Sunday, we allow ourselves to remember; hurt and grieve if we need to; and *then* we look to resurrection's light. It is right that we do this, because if we look back to the Garden of Eden, and God's original intent for the world, Death is counter to God's hope for the world.

Death defies God's plans... Death grieves God.

We know this to be true, because in today's Gospel lesson, we find Christ's response to death in verse 35: "Jesus began to weep." Lazarus was Christ's friend, and now he was dead. So, Jesus wept for his friend. Jesus wept for the loneliness and separation now felt by those who loved him. Jesus wept for the pain that came pouring out of Lazarus's sister Mary saw Jesus, knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

¹ Martin Luther, April 26th, 1518, composed 28 Theses and defended them before his Augustinian Order. This collection of Theses is arguably more significant and important than the famous 95 Theses, as they advanced Luther's position even further in an academic setting. <http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php>

Death creates loneliness and separation which defy God's intent for the human race. As we look around us this All Saints Day, we remember the names of those who have died. We can empathize with Mary's frustration with Jesus when someone we love dies too soon. We can look around our assembly and see the seats once filled by those who now rest from their labors and the pain of loss stings once again. We can empathize with the tears of Christ.

But then something remarkable happens in our Gospel story. Christ raises Lazarus from the dead. Resurrection is made known to those who follow Christ. The impassable divide between life and death is bridged and Lazarus walks in new life. In the midst of God's own grief, God is working resurrection. That is an important point in this story, because the faithful *need* this promise. God is grieved deeply by death, God is with us when *we* grieve death, and God is working resurrection *in the midst of grief*. Resurrection is the heart of the Christian witness, and *that is no less true when we grieve*.

So, in the life of the church, we point to signs of resurrection all around us each time we gather. We point to the waters of Holy Baptism where we were crucified with Christ and raised again to new life. We point to the sacrament of Holy Communion where our voices are raised with the heavenly host and Christ is truly with us, breaking the deep divide between life and death to feed and renew us with his body and blood. We point to the Word proclaimed in the assembly, remembering that in Christ the word became flesh and lived among us, speaking a word of hope to a weary world. Signs of resurrection are all around us, and in these signs we are reminded that the same Christ who raised Lazarus from the dead, who himself rose from the grave, will one day work resurrection in our lives. We too will be raised to new and abundant life. Where systems of this world are mired in sin and death, we will be raised to new and abundant life *here and now*. We will be raised to new and abundant life in the life to come, where all is reconciled to God and God's will is restored.

Though we may try to find ways to protect ourselves and soften the pain of death, Jesus did not turn away. He confronted it, he gave himself over to death on the cross, and humbled himself to death's power. It was only in weakness that his power was truly known and that death's power was broken. It was in his rising from the dead that hope was reborn and the distance was bridged. It was through his *death and resurrection* that we have been given the promise of everlasting life.

We still walk by faith in the light of this promise, but as we remember our loved ones today, we know that they no longer walk by faith, but know fully the saving power of Jesus Christ. They have faced death, and know resurrection, they are *Together with the Saints*.

Because it's in facing death, looking it in the eye, calling it what it is—calling death, 'death', and a funeral 'a funeral'—and being honest about the hurt, and pain, and god-forsakenness of the moment, that we can trust most fully in resurrection. When we realize how counter this pain is to the kingdom of God we can look to the hope of Jesus and remember what he has done for us through his death and resurrection. We can remember that *we* are being transformed.

In embracing brokenness, we can trust that wholeness has been achieved. Christ has bridged the great divide, and through him *we have unity with all the Saints*. Martin Luther described humans as "Simul Justis et Peccator", at the same time Saint and Sinner. And that is what we are. We are broken, and in need of a redeemer. When we acknowledge our brokenness, and turn it over to our redeemer in faith, we find that we are already justified, sanctified, and made whole. *We are saints*, and through this faith that our redeemer has justified us through his love on the cross—through his death and resurrection—we have peace in knowing that our loved ones as well have been justified. In this peace, *we have unity with all the saints*.

Today as we observe All Saints Day, we have an opportunity to come back to the waters of Holy Baptism. Feel again today the water that washed you. Take a moment to mark yourself with the sign of the cross as a reminder that you have been crucified in those waters with Christ and you have been raised with him. And look up to the light of the candles in this place. Let them be a light of remembrance, just as a candle was lit at your baptism, and our loved ones' baptisms, with the call to let our light shine so that through our good deeds our Creator might be glorified. As we kindle lights in this place we shine the light of the Saints who have died in this place once again. We carry their memory in our hearts day by day, and yet on this day, in worship, we are indeed ***Together with the Saints.***

We are together with the Saints of the Church on earth, simultaneously sinner and saved. And as we surround ourselves in light and love we commit to the work of the Kingdom here on earth.

We are together with the Saints of the Church from every age, those whose memories we carry in our hearts shine their light in our midst once more as we recount the transforming love of Christ.

Embrace this transformation today. Root yourself more fully in the story of Christ: a story that involves death—the pain, the sorrow, the god-forsakenness of death—and a story that involves resurrection—God transforming even the greatest of barriers to the Kingdom. God is bridging the great divide between earth and heaven, that it might be known here and now, not in some distant time.

This is the day to renew our trust in resurrection, to hand over our hurts to Christ who makes us whole, to a love that bridges the divide. The kingdom is here today, Brothers and Sisters, THIS All Saints Sunday, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. And here we are, in faith, once again... ***Together with the Saints.***

Amen.