

Sunday, November 3, 2024

All Saints' Sunday

John 11.32-44

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/3783767845286963>

(Sermon begins at about 22:00)

"Becoming Saints"

Today we celebrate All Saints' Sunday. All Saints' Day was actually November 1st—this past Friday. Although *The Book of Common Prayer* classifies All Saints' Day as one of seven Principal Feast of the liturgical year, making it a pretty big deal. Making it an even bigger deal is the fact that All Saints' is the only Feast that may be observed on the following Sunday, in addition to its observance on its fixed date. That should tell us that there is something particularly significant about this day, this celebration, if we are given two chances at its observance.

It is believed that the commemoration of all the saints on November 1st originated in Ireland, spread to England, and then on to Europe. In the early ninth century, the Pope urged the widespread observance of a festival commemorating all the saints. However, historical writings indicate that there had been localized commemorations of all the saints as early as the third century. Such celebrations were due to "the desire of Christian people to express the intercommunion of the living and the dead in the Body of Christ."¹ Recognizing that there is some profound mystical connection between us and the saints who have gone before. Something that is important to our own lives of faith.

Strictly speaking, All Saints' Day is a collective commemoration of all the "official" saints. The saints who have been officially recognized by the Church; the "big names" if you will: Francis of Assisi, Patrick, Julian of Norwich, Mother Teresa, and so many more. Although, in the Church we recognize that there are saints other than those officially recognized as such. That "saint" has a broader definition. "In the New Testament, the word 'saints' is used to describe the entire membership of the Christian community."² That being the case, since "the tenth century, it became customary to set aside another day on which the church remembered the vast body of the faithful who, though no less members of the company of the redeemed, are unknown in the wider fellowship of the church."³ That day being the feast of All Souls or All the Faithful Departed, commemorated on November 2nd. This becoming a day more focused on remembering family and friends who have died. While All Saints and All Souls still exist as separate commemorations on our liturgical calendar, it has become common practice to conflate the two into one celebration. Which is effectively what we commemorate today. All the saints, be they widely known, known only by a few, or known only to God alone.

One of the images we often hear when describing the communion of saints that "we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12.1). A beautiful image of those who have gone before us, and yet continue to be active in our own lives of faith. As those who serve as an ongoing example of faithful and Godly living. As those we can continue to look to for guidance in our own lives of faith. Those who, in some cultures, are referred to as "spiritual ancestors."

One of those spiritual ancestors, one of the members of the great cloud of witnesses, is the subject of our Gospel reading for today: Lazarus. The story of the raising of Lazarus is particularly significant in our understanding of how we and all those who have gone before become saints. Before we get to the actual raising of Lazarus, it helps to know a little about how the Gospel according to John is organized. Unlike the other Gospels, John's Gospel does not contain any parables: stories that reveal greater truths. Instead, John's Gospel uses what he calls "signs," like road signs, that point to something greater. Miraculous events that reveal Jesus' identity and mission, that reveal deeper truths about God and his kingdom, deeper truths about our place in God's kingdom. There are seven such signs in John's Gospel with the raising of Lazarus being the seventh and final sign.

Okay, spoiler alert. There is actually an eighth sign that does become important in our interpretation of the Lazarus story. That being Jesus' resurrection. The sign that undergirds all the other signs. The sign which all the others point toward. The sign that the seventh sign, the raising of Lazarus, points to most vividly and directly.

As we heard in the Gospel reading, Jesus' dear friend Lazarus has died and is buried in a tomb. Upon hearing of his death, Jesus goes to be with Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha. When Jesus asks to see Lazarus, Martha tells him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." This is a significant statement. You see, it was the traditional belief that the soul lingered around the body for three days after death. By the fourth day, it was believed that the soul left the corpse for good. No resuscitation was possible beyond that point. Martha's statement, therefore, indicating and emphasizing that Lazarus was absolutely positively dead. Indicating and emphasizing the miraculous nature of what happens next.

After praying to God, Jesus "cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth." Jesus then tells those present, "Unbind him, and let him go."

The raising of Lazarus proves to be a pivotal point in several respects. First, it foreshadows Jesus' own resurrection following his death. Of course, there is a fundamental difference between the raising of Lazarus and Jesus' resurrection. While Jesus was resurrected to a new and eternal life, Lazarus was resuscitated—returned to mortal life. Barring any tragic circumstances, he would live out his normal span of life and die, just as any human does.

Second, the raising of Lazarus demonstrates in a tangible way who Jesus is as the Son of God. As one who is able to raise Lazarus from death to life. As one who is capable of giving new life. Foreshadowing the new and eternal life that all—including Lazarus—will receive. The new and eternal life that is only made possible through Jesus' own resurrection. The eternal life we will receive through our own individual resurrections, paralleling and being a sharing in Jesus' resurrection.

And third, in an ironic twist of fate, it is Jesus' act of raising Lazarus from the dead, of foreshadowing his own resurrection, that sets in motion the events that will lead to his own death. And ultimately to his resurrection. Upon hearing of the raising of Lazarus, the Jewish

authorities issue the formal death sentence against Jesus and begin to look for an opportunity to carry it out.

Bringing it back around to our commemoration of All Saints', we recognize that the way someone—the way any of us—becomes a saint is through our incorporation into the Body of Christ. Which occurs because of Christ's resurrection, through which he defeated sin and death and opened the way for our forgiveness and entry into new and eternal life with him. All of which we celebrate at Easter. All of which is foreshadowed in the story of the raising of Lazarus.

But there is more. Particularly today. As Christians, we believe that the way we become members of the Body of Christ is through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. The sacramental act in which we go into the waters of baptism, dying to self, and emerging to a new life in Christ. The sacramental act in which we go into the waters of baptism and emerge cleansed of our sins. The sacramental act whereby we share in Christ's death and resurrection, thereby receiving the promise of eternal life in him. All part of what it means to be a saint. Thus, baptism serves as the entry point for all those we recognize as saints. Just as baptism served as our own entry into the company of the saints.

As such, All Saints' is one of the four days particularly recommended in our Prayer Book for the administration of Holy Baptism. And we honor that tradition here today. [At our 10:15 service, / In just a few moments,] we will baptize Heidi and Nolan Fialkowski, welcoming them as the newest members of the Body of Christ. While this is a significant step in the lives of these two children, providing the foundation for their own faith development and their own paths to being saints in the Church, it is also a significant event in the life of our parish and of each and every one the saints who call this place home. Just as we look to the lives of the saints, to our own spiritual ancestors, to help guide us in the faith, we need to remember that for those who follow us—for Heidi and Nolan, and many others yet to come—we are the next generation of spiritual ancestors. Today, in their baptisms, we become their spiritual ancestors. We are those who have the responsibility and the privilege to help shape, guide, and influence future generations of the faithful. That is an awesome and sacred responsibility. What we do, what we say, the example we set, will help guide those in our midst and those yet to come in their lives of faith.

But we are up to the task. Because we have our own spiritual ancestors to draw upon, to guide us, and to support us. We are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have charted the path and who continue to show us the way.

¹ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2022* (New York: Church Publishing, 2022), 488.

² *Ibid.*, 490.

³ *Ibid.*