

SERMON
All Saints Sunday
November 1, 2009

Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1-6a
John 11:32-44

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

William Willimon is a theologian and professor at Duke University. He tells the story of his friend Stuart Henry who was giving a campus tour for a father and his young son. Their first stop was a visit to Duke Chapel.

They walked up and down the aisles, heads turned upward, amazed at the stained glass windows. The father asked his son, “Do you know who the saints are?” “Sure,” said the son, “the saints are the people where the sun shines through.”

If you think about it, that’s not a bad definition of a saint. A saint is someone for whom the sun shines through. Those through whom the son S-O-N shines.

Today is All Saints Sunday. It is a day in which we remind ourselves that there is a bond between Christians who are living and those who have died. It is a day to remember those close to us who have died in the faith. It is a day to be reminded of the hope that we all have that there is a life after death – that there is a resurrection of the dead.

In our Gospel story today, we heard about the death of Lazarus. Lazarus’ sister Mary had called for Jesus earlier, but we are told that Jesus was delayed in coming. When he finally did arrive, it was too late. Lazarus was dead. So Mary runs up to Jesus, kneels at his feet and says; “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

These words of Mary are filled with sadness and regret, but also hope. On the one hand, Mary is missing her brother Lazarus terribly. So in sorrow and regret she says, “If only you had been here...”

Isn't this too how we respond to the death of a loved one? There is a sadness of the loss of our loved one, a feeling of emptiness. We realize life will never be the same without them. There is also often a feeling of regret, perhaps even guilt.

IF ONLY I would have given him a call and told him I was sorry before it was too late. IF ONLY I had taken that day off to make a visit and say my final good-bye. IF ONLY I would have been there and gotten her to the emergency room sooner. IF ONLY he would have taken care of his health a little better.

IF ONLY we would have left 5 minutes earlier, my son would still be alive. IF ONLY I would have listened to her when she said that something was wrong. IF ONLY I would have prayed a little more. IF ONLY...IF ONLY...

Some of us will be haunted with questions like these for the rest of our lives. Mary's words today perhaps can give us some comfort. But not only that, they can also help us to live each and every day to the fullest.

The following was written by an 83 year old woman to her friend.

“I'm reading more and dusting less. I'm sitting in the yard and admiring the view without fussing about the weeds in the garden.

I'm spending more time with my family and friends and less time working. Whenever possible, life should be a pattern of experiences to savor, not to endure.

I'm trying to recognize these moments now and cherish them. I'm not “saving” anything.

We use our good china and crystal for every special event such as losing a pound, getting the sink unclogged, or the first tulip blossom of the season. I wear my good blazer to the market. My theory is that if I look prosperous, I can shell out \$28.49 for one small bag of groceries.

I'm not saving my good perfume for special parties, but wearing it for clerks in the hardware store and tellers at the bank.

“Someday” and “one of these days” are losing their grip on my vocabulary.

If it's worth seeing or hearing or doing, I go see and hear and do it now. I'm not sure what others would have done had they known that they wouldn't be here for the tomorrow that we all take for granted.

I think they would have called family members and a few close friends. They might have called a few former friends to apologize and mend fences for past squabbles.

I like to think that they would have gone out for a Chinese dinner, or for whatever their favorite food was. I'm guessing; I'll never know. It's those little things left undone that would make me angry if I knew my hours were limited.

Angry because I hadn't written certain letters that I intended to write “one of these” days. Angry and sorry that I didn't tell my husband and parents often enough how much I truly love them.

I'm trying very hard not to put off, hold back, or save anything special. Every day, every minute, every breath truly is a gift from God.”

You see, Jesus specializes in IF ONLY'S. Therefore Jesus frees us from our oppressive IF ONLY'S and frees us to live each and every day to the fullest.

On the other hand, Mary's words are also a remarkable confession of faith and confidence in Jesus. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. My brother would not have died"

Here Mary trusts and believes that Jesus actually could have prevented the death of Lazarus had he been around at the time...Here is a trust – a confidence – and a faith that shines through like the beautiful multicolored light of stained glass windows.

But as the story continues we see yet another side of Jesus. A few years ago, a 5th grade Sunday School teacher wanted her students to memorize a Bible verse that could be recited in front of the congregation during the annual Christmas play.

She assumed that each child would choose a different verse knowing that she gave them the entirety of Scripture to choose from. But she did not anticipate the ingenuity of 5th graders. To her surprise, all but one chose the same Bible verse; John 11:35. "Jesus Wept."

This, of course is the shortest verse in the entire Bible. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible tried to lengthen it a bit by translating it; "Jesus began to weep". Even so, it remains the shortest verse in all of Scripture.

But even though this may be the shortest verse in all of Scripture, I believe it to be one of the most powerful. Tears speak more about what our hearts feel than any words could ever express. Those tiny drops of humanity that tumble from our eyes.

They creep down our cheeks and splash on the floors of our hearts. They carry the message that our hearts ache and hurt. Tears are the messengers that sometimes substitute for our crippled words.

They spill forth carrying with them our deepest emotions. A tear falling on a casket says what a spoken farewell never could.

What summons a mother's compassion and concern more quickly than a tear on the cheek of her child? What gives more support than the tears on the face of a friend as we pour out our troubles to them?

What do we do when the words just won't come out of our mouths? When even the loftiest statements seem empty, what do we do?

I would propose to you that tears are a language that God understands. Washington Irving wrote; "There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than 10,000 tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition and of unspeakable love."

A few years ago, four-year-old Connor Clapton fell to his death from a high rise apartment window in New York City. After the tragedy, his father, rock guitarist Eric Clapton said, "I turned to stone. Then I went off the edge of the world for a while."

In time, Clapton put his tortured feelings in the words of a song: *"Time can bring you down, time can bend your knees. Time can break your heart, have you begging please. Beyond the door there's peace I'm sure. And I know there'll be no more tears in heaven."*

Of course these words reflect the words of our second reading today from Revelation: "The Lord will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

I know for a fact that many of you have experienced tears this past year. You have grieved over the death of a loved one. A grandparent, a parent, a child, a spouse, a friend. You know all too well the feeling of crying yourself to sleep at night. I also know that this coming year will be no different. Some of you will experience death in your family.

So where is it that we find hope in the midst of death? The one thing we can know for sure is that God is on the side of life. As we read earlier in St. John's Gospel, Jesus says; "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Therefore today we do not only mourn those who have died, but we celebrate their new life in Christ Jesus. And because of that, we need not fear. For nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I would like to close with a parable taken from the book "A Lamp for My Feet". It is called "The Parable in a Car Wash".

"My eighteen-month-old grandson Walter, his father, and I were out for a drive when his father decided it was time to have the car washed. Those automatic car washes can be a bit scary on the first run-through, even for an adult.

I watched Walter's face as the car was drawn into the dark tunnel. The water suddenly began to roar down over all four sides of the car. Walter's big blue eyes all of a sudden got bigger and bigger.

Then immediately his eyes went from looking out the windows to his father's face. He was too small to understand what it was all about, and he'd had no explanation beforehand. What he did know was that Daddy would take care of him.

Then the giant brushes began to close in around us, whirling and sloshing making a tremendous noise. It grew even darker inside the car. The boy had no way of knowing whether we would get out of this alive. His eyes darted again from the brushes to the face of his father. I could see he was afraid, but he didn't cry.

Then the rubber wheel came banging down on the windshield, and hot air began to blast us. It must have seemed to the child that this tunnel had no end.

There was only one thing Walter could do. He put his trust in his father. His father had never given him any reason not to trust him.

When the car finally broke out into sunshine, the little boy's face broke into a big smile. Everything was okay; Daddy knew what he was doing after all."

Like Walter, most of us have been through some dark tunnels. Although they were frightening, in the end, God has somehow delivered us.

Jesus was delayed in his coming to heal Lazarus. Even so, Mary trusted him. And through the raising of Lazarus, Jesus offers the world a vision of the life to come. A time when death will be no more.

A time when mourning and crying and pain will be no more. A time when God will wipe every tear from our eyes. For Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

How many of you have ever cried before?

What are some reasons why you cried?

In our Bible Story today it says that Jesus cried. Do any of you know why he was crying?

Jesus was crying because his friends were very sad. They were sad because Lazarus had died. Lazarus was part of their family. He was a good friend.

Do any of you know anyone who has died?

Today, is All Saints Sunday. Do you see all of the candles up front. They help us to remember all of our friends or family who have died and have now gone to live with Jesus. We call them Saints.

Do you know what a Saint is? A Saint is someone who is a follower of Jesus. So does that make each of you a Saint? Yes. All of us here today are Saints. Not only us sitting here, but all followers of Jesus who have died. That's a lot of people, isn't it?

Back to our Bible Story. After Jesus cried for a while, what did he do? He brought Lazarus back to life.

That's what he will do with all of his followers someday. Jesus will bring us all back to life even though we will die. That's what we remember on this day we call "All Saints Sunday."

Let us pray.....