

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

November 6, 2022 (All Saints Sunday, Year C)
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

Who are you? Where do you come from? What makes you who you are?

We'd like to think that life is just about US, about what WE think, and what we WANT, but in truth, without those who've gone before us, we're nothing. The way we look, what we like and don't like, what we like to do, the KIND of people we like to spend time with, it has ALL been INFLUENCED by our parents, and grandparents, and great-grandparents.

This town was built by people before us, this state was settled by people before us, our way of life in this country, our FREEDOM, was WON and DEFENDED by people before us. Someone once said that we're standing on the shoulders of GIANTS. Everything that we have, and everything that we ARE, has been either influenced or GIVEN to us by others. It's our INHERITANCE.

Who are WE to GIVE UP what's been passed down to us? We must not LET ourselves FORGET about our loved ones, and the inheritance they've given to us. REMEMBERING is what MAKES us who we ARE.

It's about connection. We LONG for CONNECTION. In many European countries on All Saints' Day, cemeteries are filled with lit candles placed in front of every gravestone. On that night, people GO to cemeteries to SOAK up the light and to be reminded that we are SURROUNDED by the light of those who have gone BEFORE us. The light of those candles represents the STORIES of life and death that have touched OUR lives. The FLICKERING lights are signs of our aching hearts and our flowing tears.

It's HARD for some of us to make that KIND of connection anymore. People used to know their "family trees" as well as they knew their own furniture. But America has always been a country of new arrivals and movement and growth, and for some of us the past is a blur. After GENERATIONS of being on the move and unattached, people are seeking that connection again. Genealogy community education classes are all the rage. There are now internet sites, like Ancestry.com, that offer to help us FIND our "ancestry." But many of us don't HAVE "family trees," a familiar forest of known relatives we can point to and proudly claim as our own. Some of us have a family blackberry bush – an unwieldy, twisted, brier-patch. But whether you have a well-shaped family tree or an untamed bramble bush in your personal history, EVERY ONE of us is looking for CONNECTION.

So when someone we love dies, we LOSE that connection, we lose a part of OURSELVES. Here in Aitkin, and here at First, we know this all too well. This has been a difficult last couple years for us, as we have lost MANY people who were dear to us. And when they died, they took a piece of us WITH them. And it hurts...a lot. Grief is so painful, nearly unbearable. It's an open wound, a raw nerve. We FEEL SO vulnerable.

Now vulnerability is a NICE SOUNDING word, but it names a condition most of us would like to AVOID, that we're UNCOMFORTABLE with. Vulnerability implies need and dependence, and often that's NOT comfortable. It's often been said that we have a culture of "rugged individualism." We don't NEED ANYBODY. We do it our way, and we don't CARE what anybody says about it. Our CULTURE encourages us to AVOID vulnerability, as if we COULD or SHOULD, avoid it.

While vulnerability may be uncomfortable, it's ALSO what makes us HUMAN. When we try to NUMB those things that are uncomfortable or pose a risk – feelings of sadness, grief, and vulnerability – we ALSO numb our capacity to feel JOY, satisfaction, and happiness.

All Saints Day reminds us that the church, at its BEST, can be a PLACE of vulnerability, proclaiming that it's NOT something to shun or deny, because God has promised to MEET us precisely IN our moments of vulnerability, IN our moments of need, and IN our moments of

brokenness. This is why Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, comes DOWN the mountain to BLESS those who the world and circumstances have made to FEEL LIKE they're NOTHING, and WARN those who believe that they don't NEED God.

We DO need God, and we DO need others. We NEED to REMEMBER. Think about that WORD "remember." What IS a "member"? It's an IMPORTANT part. To lose a member of your BODY, like a hand, means to lose an important PART of YOURSELF. SO is losing a member of your FAMILY. It's losing a part of YOURSELF. So is the death of one of our members of the CHURCH. We lose a PART of who we ARE together. To REMEMBER is to RE-MEMBER that person, if only for a moment, to RESTORE that member again, to RECOVER that lost part, to RECONNECT with those MOMENTS that shaped who we are. REMEMBERING MAKES us who we are.

And remembering is what this All Saints' Sunday is about. This is the day of the church year when we remember the SAINTS, all the baptized who have finished their course by faith, and now rest from their labors. This morning we'll remember by name some of those most dear to us, who have gone on ahead to their great reward. We do this not because we worship or venerate our deceased loved ones, but because their LIVES POINT us to God. Their EXAMPLE SHOWS us the way, and their MEMORY CONTINUES to lead us on that path. This is the day that we take seriously the words we say in the Apostles' Creed: We "believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

We remember those who've gone before us, because their lives helped SHAPE OUR lives. They're a PART of us. Their personality, their smile, their laugh, their HURTS, and their FAITH are a part of US now. It's our inheritance. If we FORGET them, we LOSE a part of OURSELVES. And so we RE-MEMBER them.

Together, on this All Saints' Sunday, in the memory and presence of those who have gone before you, in the promise of those who follow you, and in the hope of the faith we share, DEAR SAINTS, REMEMBER.

Let us pray. O God, we give you thanks for ALL the saints, the great, the NOT so great, the courageous, the faithful, the bold ones, and EVEN the timid ones, who loved you each in their own time and place and way, showing US the WAY to eternal life. Thank you for letting us walk WITH them. Help us to remember them always. May WE show OTHERS the way. Amen.

And amen.