

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

November 7, 2021 (All Saints Sunday, Year B)
John 11:32-44
Isaiah 25:6-9
Revelation 21:1-6

A few years ago, I saw a story on the news that just broke my heart. The reporter was in California covering wildfires, and she interviewed a family that had just lost their home. There was a little girl, maybe 10 years old, and the reporter asked her what she would miss the most from her house. She answered, "My pillow that smelled like grandma. It smelled just like grandma, because she made it for me before she died. I can't find it anywhere." And then she cried.

There's something deeply important about remembering. Today is a DAY FOR remembering: All Saints Sunday. This is the day of the church year when we remember the saints, all of them, ALL the baptized who have finished their course by faith, and now rest from their labors. This morning we will 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 of discipleship.

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." This is a day for remembering.

When a loved one dies, it hurts. It's painful. Their place at the table is vacant. Their pew is empty. The loss is real. Our hearts ache to hear their voice and hold them one more time. Isaiah called it "the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations."

When Jesus came to the grave of his friend Lazarus, his sisters were grieving. His friends were in tears. Even Jesus, who loved Lazarus, "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." And then we find one of the shortest and most profound verses in all of Scripture: "Jesus began to weep."

Think about that for a moment. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end...weeps...because his friend has died. He doesn't look down with superiority on those who grieve, because they should know better; he weeps -- WITH them.

When our loved ones pass away, after some time we're told to "move on." And what that really means is to act like nothing has happened, like the person never existed. We're urged to forget them, to "get over it," to get on with our lives. But do we really EVER "get over it?"

I heard of a man who lost his wife several years ago. He gets on with his work; he laughs and plays; he enjoys life and has his OWN health to worry about; but he says, "Naw, 'I'm not 'over it,' I don't even WANT to 'get over it'—good God, what KIND of people would we be if we COULD 'get over it,' the loss of people we love the most?"

We CAN'T forget about our loved ones. We mustn't. REMEMBERING is what makes us who we are. 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, and their faith are a part of US now.

Our hope isn't that someday we'll forget. We CAN'T forget them. Our hope is in remembering.

A pastor I know visited a woman whose husband had died a few days before. Her husband was READY to die and it was a peaceful death. His widow said something to the pastor that he will never forget. She said, "Pastor, I have such a clear vision of heaven right now."

Our faith in Christ tells us that those who die STILL live in God's loving embrace. Their LIGHT still shines. In the grace and love of Christ, they're here WITH us, among us, around us — all that we mean by “the communion of saints.”

In the book of Hebrews (12:1), Paul says that “we are surrounded by great a CLOUD of witnesses.” What a beautiful image. The witnesses are our ancestors, our loved ones, our grandparents and parents, our spouses and children who died before their time, our friends and teachers.

I once heard a military chaplain put it this way: “If we close our eyes, and listen with our hearts, we can still see them.”

The saints are the great cloud of witnesses. They have already seen God's glory with their own eyes. And now they share that love with us. They surround us with it. They gather around us and bind us together in love.

And as they did in life, they take us by the hand, and point us to God, and say, “There IS hope.” They WHISPER hope into our souls, as we remember the words of Isaiah and John. As we saw with Lazarus, death ISN'T the end of the story. Jesus ALWAYS has the last word, and it's a word of hope and promise.

If we close our eyes, and listen with our hearts, we can almost see it:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,

“See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God...God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.... See I am making all things new.”

Wow! Did you hear the promise? Did you catch the vision? God himself, the SAME God that in Christ Jesus wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus, will gently wipe the tears from YOUR eyes. What a beautiful vision.

It's an image of hope. It's the SAME hope that sustained our loved ones in life. The SAME hope that gave us the peace and the strength to survive their loss. And the SAME hope that, someday, will lead us to be with them AGAIN in God's eternal embrace.

Today we remember our saints, because remembering gives us hope. Thank you, Lord, for giving them to us to know and to love. Amen