

“Telling the Stories to Open Our Eyes”

Sermon: Year A, All Saints Sunday

Text: Matthew 5:1–12

Preached: November 5, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Sisters and brothers, rejoice, and be glad! Yours is the kingdom of God. AMEN

In a few minutes, we'll be reading a list of names. They're printed there in your bulletin. Yesterday, I sat down and read through that list several times. To be honest, most of the names are unfamiliar to me, because I never had opportunity to know the people named. Other names, though, are very familiar to me, because I had the blessing of knowing the people. Some of these saints lived a long time ago. Some of these losses are still raw...some only weeks old. And some of the newer losses represented here are my own, people whose stories I know intimately. But every name listed leaves me wishing I knew more about that person, wishing that I knew why you had asked that they be remembered. Every name leaves me wanting to know the story.

This is an odd kind of festival day, when it comes down to it...or at least seemingly odd. We gather to remember our dead, yet we hear scriptures in which Jesus tells us, “Blessed—literally, *happy*—are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Happy? It seems more like a day for a good cry. But you see, Jesus knows something—something vital. Jesus knows that God's kingdom is breaking in all around us, and that death itself is being destroyed, swallowed up in life and resurrection. So those who mourn are blessed, are happy, because they will be able to look around them and see those signs of God's work, will be able to know that assurance of resurrection and life, and will be comforted and encouraged by the knowledge that death has not had the final victory.

This feast of All Saints has its origins in the practice of the early Christians. Each year on the anniversary of the death of one of their brothers or sisters in Christ, they would gather at that person's tomb for a meal. A few years ago, we visited the catacombs in Rome, those vast, underground multi-leveled passageways where the ancient Romans, including the first Christians, would bury their dead. Those who could afford it would carve out rooms with stone benches. They would bring lavish, festive picnic lunches down with them, and would spread out a banquet in front of the tomb. Then just as we do at our Thanksgiving feast, they would sit around the table and talk, and give thanks to God. They would even paint frescoes showing the dead sitting around a banquet table, their names painted alongside them, as a visual reminder that those who were dead were nonetheless feasting right there with them, separated only by this strange, permeable barrier that we call death. And they would sit around and tell the stories of how God had blessed and sustained the dead loved one, and of how God had used that person to bless them. They would listen to those examples of holy living and holy action, And then as part of their meal, they would bless the bread and the cup, give thanks, and they would share the Eucharist together there.

At the time of the Reformation, however, among Lutherans and other Protestants the practice of remembering the saints by telling their stories fell into disfavor, partly because of a rejection of the notion that one could pray to the saints for favors and aid, and partly because of the sometimes exaggerated and superstitious tales and legends that had grown up around some saints' memories. Luther recommended that only the feast days of the apostles and of the Blessed Virgin be maintained on the calendar. He also wanted to erase the distinction between a rarified class of believers who seemed to have achieved perfection, and the rest of us, who “feebly struggle.” We are all saints, we are all being made holy by the work of the Holy Spirit through our baptism. Slowly, though, over the past several decades, Lutherans have begun to recover the practice of remembering saints, usually on their death anniversaries, but remembering them as examples of holy living whose lives can instruct our own, remembering them to give thanks to God for them.

That, brothers and sisters, is what we do today. We gather around this table to name those saints, those happy ones, through whom God has blessed us, and give thanks to God for them. I wish we had time to tell all their stories. I could tell you stories about St. Norman of Friendswood, my father who died this summer. St. Norman was a dedicated pastor for 53 years. He tirelessly visited the sick and the grieving for decades, and never once refused to conduct a funeral at the local funeral home for people he had never met. One time, he was asked to lead a service for a woman who had died, and the only mourners present were her husband and the funeral director. Two weeks later, the man contacted the funeral director, in tears because St. Norman had called him to see how he was doing, overwhelmed with gratitude for that simple kindness.

We could tell wonderful stories about St. Verlaine of Evanston, faithful guardian of children, whose gifts for teaching and encouraging little ones made her beloved by many generations. Or we could tell stories of St. Ralph Glader, gentle servant of the church, eager student of religion and philosophy, loving husband, faithful caretaker to his mother-in-law. What are the stories you could tell about the people we name today?

We don't do enough storytelling, do we? We need to tell one another those stories more often, stories of how we've seen God at work in the lives of others, because they inspire us and give us hope, and they speak Good News to us. We need to tell our own stories, too...and not only the stories of those saints who have died in the Lord. We need to be telling the stories of the saints around us this very day, right here in this assembly, those who are sitting beside us. We need to tell the stories of Sts. Scott, and Linda, and Kim, and Anne, and Audrey, and Amy, and Eric, and all those faithful bakers of fragrant loaves of bread for our Eucharist. We need to tell the stories of St. Laura, tireless creator of communication materials to invite and inform, and champion of the post card campaign to help people advocate for kingdom values. We need to tell the stories of St. Chris, dedicated organizer of markets and quilting. We need to tell the stories of St. Mildred, faithful choir singer who climbed the stairs to the choir loft to praise God in song for 73 years, or St. Greg, who has supported our worship with beautiful organ music for almost five decades. We need to tell the story of St. Bob, who even when weak and frail still went to visit shut-ins, and faithfully took bulletins and sermons to them so they could feel connected to the community. We need to tell the stories of Saints Tom, and Kim, and earlier Saints Sarah and Chris, and all those who have made breakfast at Café Immanuel for so many years. We need to tell the stories of St. Nicolai, whose gentle passion for service to the least of these, along with those saints who serve on Social Ministry, has helped so many. We need to tell the stories of Saint Kit, who organizes our worship leaders from her deep love for worship. We need to tell the stories of Saints Joe and Mary Ann, and Elizabeth, whose gifts for numbers and recordkeeping are used to maintain the financial records of this congregation, allowing us to do ministry. We need to tell the stories of Saints Kevin, and Jim McCarthy, and Jim Skelton, and Sara, and Ernie, and Fran, whose gifts for working with their hands maintain this property so it can be used for God's service. We need to tell the stories of St. Kurt, who built and maintains our organ. We need to tell the stories of St. Charly, who leads us in our welcome to the stranger through the All Are Welcome task force.

I'm going to stop there, and please, please, do not be hurt if I have not yet mentioned you. I could talk about the stories of the saints on Council, the saints on Worship and Music, the saints who organize our common meals, the saints who prepare the Table, the saints who usher and greet, the saints who help at the market, the saints who quilt, the saints who teach... the list goes on and on and on. But here's the point: we need to talk more about those ways in which God is touching us through others, both the dead and the living, but also the ways in which God is using us to bless those around us. That's how we share Good News to build one another up and to bless a world that so much needs to hear Good News. We should never be silent about telling the stories of what God is doing through those around us. Thank you, saints of God, living and breathing, thank you, saints of God, whose victory is won, for the ways in which you have lived out the happiness of humility, and peacemaking, and righteousness, the ways in which you have helped bring the abundant life that Jesus speaks of.

But I also want to leave you with a question to ponder. If someone were to tell the story of *you* as saint, what story would they tell? Think about that this week. What are the ways in which God is using you, or could be using you, to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth?

In a few moments, we'll name those who have entered the Church on Earth through baptism this year, and give thanks to God for the new stories that have begun. And then we'll name those who have become part of the Church in Heaven. We won't have time to tell their stories today, but I want you to remember those stories in your hearts, and tell them to others. Don't stop at mourning their physical absence...give thanks to God for the victory we have over death in Christ Jesus, and be comforted by that, and then look around you and remember that you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. As you light candles and name names, give thanks for the stories. And then we will celebrate the great feast together with grateful hearts, knowing that death has been swallowed up in victory, and that we feast here and now with all those whom God has made holy, with all the saints, part of the great story of what God has done and will do... Thanks be to God. AMEN