

“The Community of Saints”
Sermon: Year B All Saints Sunday
Text: John 11:32–44

Preached: November 4, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you, from the One who binds us together in one great communion. AMEN

Did you know that there’s an election coming up? Unlike some other pastors who’ve been in the news lately, I’m not going to stand here today and tell you how to vote, though I will tell you that as followers of Jesus, we should participate actively in the systems of this world in ways that help bring about good for our neighbors. I’ve been struck, though, by a growing phenomenon. I was talking with a young person the other day who voiced something that I think has become common. She said, “Why should I vote? My vote is not going to matter. I don’t matter, basically. I’m just going to keep my head down, do my job, and look out for me. It’s everyone for themselves.”

I was saddened by that, in large measure because I realized that it represents a much larger issue, something that we’re at risk of losing as a society...and I think it represents something that we risk losing as the church, too. Our culture has drifted in a surprisingly short time toward a philosophy of pessimism and cynicism, a cult of isolationism and individualism that very cynically argues that what we do together does not matter...and worse still, that what we do as individuals doesn’t matter. We’re losing a sense of community, a sense of joining together for the common good, a sense of purpose, a sense of the importance of our participation—and that is as true of our participation in the democratic process as it is of our participation in the life of the community of faith. Many of us feel adrift, as though we do not belong anywhere. The things that connected us—family, community, society—don’t seem to have the strength they once had. We’ve created a culture in which we do not see how we matter to one another.

OK, I’ll stop there. I can see you starting to say to yourselves, “Wow, that is a downer! I came today to hear some good news, not to be depressed! And what does this have to do with All Saints Day, anyway?” Please understand, I’m not saying this to depress you, and I’m certainly not saying it to make you feel guilty. I’m saying it as a means of reminding us all that we *do* belong, and that what we do together as the body of Christ assembled together, and individually as the saints of God living in this world and going about our daily lives, *does* matter...what we do in our daily lives has significance.

Yes, sisters and brothers, *you are saints, and your lives matter*. All of you, holy ones of God, look around you. Really, look around you. You are looking at saints, you are looking at holy ones. Look at your bulletin, at the list of those we are remembering today. Those too, dear people, are saints, holy ones. Now, you say, “I’m not so holy. You should see some of the things I do...and that name I turned in for the remembrance, she was no saint...I loved her dearly, but there were times she could be downright mean.” But you see, being a saint of God, being a holy one, isn’t our doing. It is God who has declared us holy. We are not holy because of our work or perfection, but because of God’s work in us and through us. We are not holy because of some inherent quality in ourselves. We’re holy very simply because God calls us so. God is making us so.

In scripture, the word “holy” means “set apart for God’s work.” Have you ever thought about what you do in your daily life as holy? A few years back, I had a conversation with a gentleman, a stranger to me. I was at a congregational event at my previous congregation, a big craft fair they held every year to benefit Habitat for Humanity. So it was a holy gathering, in a way. He began to talk to me, initially because he saw my nametag and discovered that we were both named Keith. As we talked, I learned that he was a house painter. He began to tell me about some of the jobs he has done, about creating beauty inside and outside of houses, and then about building a ramp so an older woman could still get down to the lower level of her house. And then he said something very, very profound. He said, “You know, I’ve come to realize that what I do as a painter is a calling. It’s kind of holy, in a way. You have your calling as a pastor, and you help people that way, and I found my calling as a painter, and I always try to approach it that way. I try to help others through helping them have nice places to live.” That man gets it! Being holy ones is not about being perfect. No saint ever is. All of us are simultaneously saint and sinner. What it is about is being open to allowing God to use us, however imperfectly, in whatever small ways—no matter whether we are children, adults, employed, unemployed, retired, disabled, no matter what our condition—to serve others and to care for the world that God loves so much. We are being made holy not for our own benefit alone, but for the benefit of all that God has created.

Prof. David Lose says it very well:

“...any work we do in faith can be called holy. Changing the diapers of our kids, or the diapers of someone else's kids in a preschool, for instance. Or volunteering with the Girl Scouts. Or creating a home where laughter resounds. Or deliberating about which candidate to vote for and then getting to the polls to cast that vote. Or being faithful in our duties at home or work. Or visiting a neighbor who has a hard time getting out. Or befriending a kid at school that other kids pick on. Or... Well, you get the idea. There is precious little in our life that can't be a place where God is at work to heal, comfort, and restore, if we look at it in this way.”

Viewed in that light, we can look at ourselves and realize that we are set apart for God's purposes. We can look at the names on that list and know that they, too, were set apart, made holy by God, no matter how imperfect they may have been. We are made God's holy ones, God's saints, by God's own self, set apart to love and serve in big ways, sometimes, but most often in those smaller acts of service and kindness. God calls us to participate in God's design to make this world holy, to make it whole. The words “holy” and “saint” aren't reserved for “churchy” things...they include the most mundane details of our lives that can be transformed into holy acts, sometimes without us even realizing it.

It's interesting, in today's gospel reading, one which has been read at countless funerals because of its powerful message of resurrection, there's something that I had never really thought of before. Jesus performs this amazing miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. But he doesn't do it alone. He invites those standing there to participate. First he says to the assembled community, “Take away the stone.” And then, when Lazarus has been raised, he tells the community, “Unbind him and set him free.” The community gathered there is given the opportunity to participate in the miracle, in effect to complete the miracle. And notice that the community gathered there includes people who don't believe in Jesus, or at best who are skeptical or even angry with Jesus. Sisters and brothers, you and I are called together in community to participate in and complete the ongoing miraculous things that God is doing in our world to heal and restore all those things that are broken. We are called—no, we're commanded—to take away the stones so the stench of death can dissipate and light can enter. We are called—no, we're commanded—to unbind and set free those who are bound by death and its destructive ways. We're commanded to do that for one another, too. That's why it's so important to gather together as a community of believers. None of us can do these things alone. But if we bring together our gifts, our resources, our talents, our small and seemingly insignificant acts of service, and do them together, suddenly miraculous things begin to occur. What are the miraculous things that God wants to do here at Immanuel, here in Evanston, or in the larger world, working in and through me and you, the assembled saints of God here?

That could sound overwhelming. But sisters and brothers, we are not in this alone. When that drumbeat in your head that comes from our culture says to you that you do not matter, that you are alone in this world and that all that matters is keeping your head down and looking out for yourself, when you are tempted to isolate yourself, to stay away from being in community and committing yourself to life together with other saints, with others who are being made holy, those are the moments that you most need to gather with others of God's holy ones to participate in God's work of resurrection. Those are the moments when you most need to be reminded that you have been called into life through your baptism in order to carry out God's holy work in the world, and that you are called not as an individual alone, but you have been called into the body of Christ, into community. You are called to participation and connection. You belong.

All these saints named in the bulletin, and all the saints we will name aloud in a few moments, were called and set apart by God for God's purpose of abundant life for all. You and I continue the work that these saints began, the work that they shared with us, the countless small acts of life and healing that they gave to us. So there again, we are not alone. We all gather around the feasting table, both the living and the dead, the table where God feeds us, where God reminds us of the ultimate victory that Christ has won over death. This is the feast where you and I get a foretaste of the celebration banquet that these saints enjoy already. In just a moment, we will light candles to remind us that they live now in resurrection life, and that they, too, are gathered with us around the table of grace, where God wipes away all tears.

Don't let anyone ever tell you that you are alone, that you don't matter, that you don't belong. And remember this: Together with all of God's holy ones, both living and dead, you and I are participants in God's saving, life-giving acts to unbind and set free all those things that are bound. We are participants in rolling away the stones. The God who is making us holy can and will use us to make all things new. Thanks be to God!
AMEN.