

**"For All the Saints "**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian, New Canaan – November 7, 2021**

**PLEASE READ:**  
**Revelation 21:1-6a**  
**John 11:32-44**

Today is All Saints Sunday in the church calendar, a day which has been celebrated at this time since the eighth century when Gregory III dedicated a chapel in the basilica of St. Peter to "All the saints." Michelangelo chose this day in 1512 to reveal the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel for the first time. The young artist was 33 years old and tried to point out that he was a sculptor, not a painter, but the pope wouldn't listen. It took him four years to finish the job, between 1508 and 1512. He worked from a scaffold 60 feet above the floor, and he covered about 10,000 square feet of surface. Every day, fresh plaster was laid over a part of the ceiling and Michelangelo had to finish painting before the plaster dried.

The German writer Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, "We cannot know what a human being can achieve until we have seen the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel." I guess it's a good reminder also that even the most unlikely people can do great things.

Today we remember that we are part of what the Creed calls "the communion of saints," and that we are surrounded by what the writer of Hebrews calls that "great cloud of witnesses." This past year I have done more memorial services than I did in twelve years in Paris. Some of those people were family of some of you, and I love the fact that we take time to read the names each year. It's moving, and even if we haven't lost a loved one this year, hearing the names reminds us of our other dearly departed from before, and it is always good to remember those who have gone before us.

They are, in the words of the great bidding prayer of Lessons and Carols, "those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom, in this Lord Jesus, we for evermore are one." Those who have died in the faith we believe are already experiencing that reality described in our lesson from the Revelation to John where "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more..."

So we remember all the saints today, and I would encourage you to take a moment to reflect and remember those who are what I call "balcony people..." those people who have taught and trained, encouraged and inspired, loved and lifted you into the Kingdom of God through their words, prayers, life examples; through their faithful grace, love and forgiveness. They may be parents, grandparents, family, friends, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, or even preachers. Remember and give thanks to God for them...

I always remember my grandparents, but especially my grandmother on my father's side. She was such a loving person, and the one in the family you knew you could talk to and never experience judgment or shame. She was always so loving and accepting. It was about twenty-five years ago when we better understood why she was so full of grace. It was a few months after my grandfather had died. My dad called me in Switzerland to tell me that he just learned

he had another brother, and that I had another uncle I never knew about.

It came as quite a shock, but we learned that my grandmother had gotten pregnant before she was married. Nowadays, you wouldn't think twice about that, but back in those days *in Lancaster County*, it was quite the scandal. The Bishop graciously sent her away to have the baby quietly, and we learned that my grandfather agreed to marry my grandmother, on the condition that the baby would never be mentioned again. My grandfather died, and so grandma shared with the family the secret she had been keeping for some 60 plus years. Then it all made sense. She had received grace and forgiveness, so she was the most non-judgmental person in the world. You can share grace when you've received grace.

She's one of my balcony people, and I thank God for her. She's a "saint" to me. And we need to always remember and look to those balcony people in our lives who taught us grace and unconditional love.

But today we also remember that we are called to live into our own sainthood. Did you know that any and all who have faith in Jesus Christ are called saints. That's right, throughout the letters of Paul, anyone who has put their faith in Christ is considered a "saint." The term "hagios" in the N.T. Greek literally means "holy ones." The Latin word "Sanctus," means "holy," and is where our English word "saints" comes from... So yes, you are a "saint!"

Most of us are uncomfortable with being called a "saint," because, well, most of us don't live a holy and just life. But it's important to remember that we are called saints because of what God has done for us that we could not do for ourselves. We are called saints because we have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. We are called saints because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are called saints because though we have but a mustard seed of faith we take great comfort and strength in the fact that in life and in death, we have a faithful Savior...

Last week I talked about Zombie culture. Today's gospel lesson recalls a scene that could be taken right out of the Night of the Living Dead movie. It's the famous text of Lazarus being called forth from the tomb. Still wrapped in the cloths used to preserve the corpse Lazarus is called out of the tomb to new life and Jesus commands the astonished crowd to unbind him! Only recorded in the gospel according to John, the story of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus, and points to the hope and purpose we have as the people of God. In Christ, there is a new heaven and a new earth, and we are called to live into it.

Recently, I read an article by Sam Wells, pastor of St. Martin-in-the-fields, London.

*"You can't discover hope until you've at least glimpsed despair. Hope is not to be trivialized. It's not positivity or optimism. Hope is eschatological, not teleological. The difference is this: teleology works from now to the future; it asks what actions now best accord with the final goal we're working towards or the ultimate purpose we were created for. It stretches the present into the future. Eschatology works from the future to now. It brings the future into the present.*

*It regards the future as more real than the present and evaluates all present actions to the degree they accord with the future that will come to the present. Teleology is anthropological – it's something humans do. Eschatology is theological – it's something God does."*<sup>1</sup>

As saints, you see, we are called to live into that great vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Our hope is that God will consummate this vision. Our purpose is to live as if the vision will become a reality. It's only a matter of time. Both our compass and our metric for progress is self-giving love, unconditional love that looks for nothing in return except to see another person set free to experience for themselves and share with others God's love.

I would encourage you to remember that a holy life, a saintly life, is one that overflows with the love of God... a love for God that is expressed in love for the people around you, whoever they might be. The great reformers always put *pietas*, "piety" and *caritas*, "charity," together. In other words, our devotion for God can never be separated from our devotion to caring for our neighbor. Jesus said it bluntly in another verse, "Whenever you have done it for the least of these, you have done it to me..." Or James put it this way, "Faith without works is dead."

Our status as Saints of the most high God is something we *experience* only some of the time. But we must remember that our sainthood is *a reality* all of the time, because it is a gift from God. The gift of atonement, righteousness, justification is only *God's gift* to give. Grace is a gift, grace is not earned. Sometimes we are aware of the gift and sometimes we are not.

I've always wondered how Lazarus lived the rest of his life. Of course he died again. Nothing more is said about him in the New Testament, and even apocryphal writers don't mention him... The Greek Orthodox Church believes that Lazarus had to flee to Cyprus and lived there thirty more years. In the West, there is a medieval legend that Lazarus ended up in France. I find both of these stories rather suspicious. We'll never know, of course, but I suspect that Lazarus did live differently, perhaps with greater hope and purpose, knowing that death is not ultimate.

John Calvin, the great French reformer, notes, "not only did Christ give a remarkable proof of his Divine power in raising Lazarus, but he likewise placed before our eyes a lively image of our future resurrection."<sup>2</sup>

Like Lazarus, we, the saints of God, have been brought forth to new life and are called to live differently. I loved the command of Jesus in our lesson to the larger community: "Unbind him." It's as if healing and liberation is not something we can do on our own. We need one another and are called to help unbind or liberate others. If we have received God's grace, then we cannot help but extend that grace to others.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Well, "Coming, Ready or Not: The Character of Advent Hope," (*Journal for Preachers*, Volume XLV, No. 1, Advent, 2021), 10.

<sup>2</sup> "John 11 Calvin's Commentaries". Biblehub.com. Retrieved November 1, 2021.

Come, then, to receive from the Lord's table, to gather mindful of that great cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints that join us. Come eat, drink, and be filled. This bread and this cup is here for you as a reminder of God's unconditional love for you. A gift. It is for *all* the saints, both the righteous and the rogues – the saints and the sinners; those whom we might normally exclude. Friends, here for *you* and all the saints is a reminder of the Lord's amazing grace and love. Let's live into it and see what great things God will do even through us...

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*

*In response to the gospel, I invite you to please stand and affirm our faith using the Apostles' Creed, a statement of faith used for centuries and around the world. Let us say what we believe...*