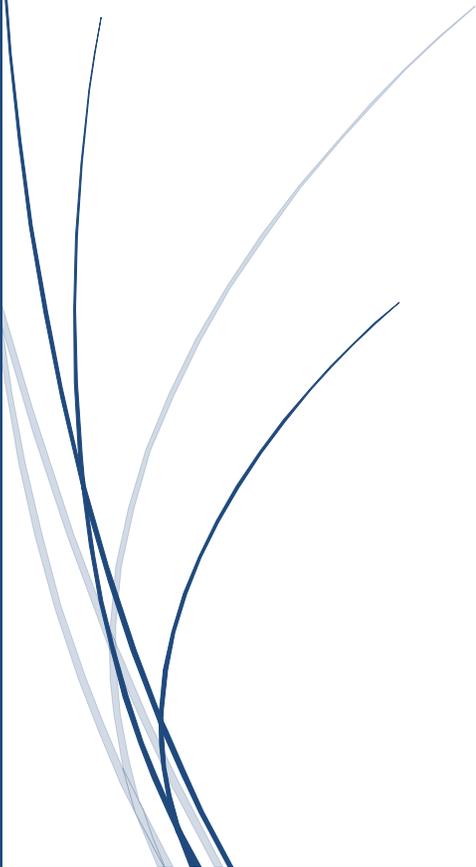


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All Saints' Day

John 11:1-45



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Once upon a time, there were two brothers who lived in particular town where they were involved in corruption, deceit and every manner of vice. It was rumored that they were affiliated with some very famous organized crime families as well. Whatever the case, both brothers had accumulated much wealth through their dishonest means.

There was little grief in the town when the older brother died. But his younger brother, wanting to honor his elder sibling, went all out in planning the funeral. The problem was finding a minister willing to do the service, given that neither of them had ever graced the steps of a church. Knowing that one of the local churches was in the midst of a capital campaign for some much needed repairs, the younger brother called upon the minister.

"Reverend," he said, "I know my brother and I never attended your church, as a matter of fact we never attended any church. I also know that you've probably heard a lot of things about my brother and I, this being a small town and all, but I'd like you to do my brother's funeral. And if you'll say he was a saint, I'll write you a check for 50,000 dollars. That'll go along way to fixing up the church."

After some thought, the pastor agreed to have the service. The pastor, however, also had a condition. The \$50,000 had to be paid in advance. And so it was.

On the day of the funeral, the church was crowded. Curiosity brought dozens of people in, who were certainly not there to honor the rich man, but to see what the minister would actually say. The remainder of the crowd was made up of mobsters and women the brothers associated with.

The service began with the usual scriptures, hymns and prayers - and then came the sermon. The minister began slowly, but then step by step

launched into a litany of the horrible things the rich man had done, how he had been selfish, greedy, corrupt, caring about no one but himself, carousing with women, drinking excessively, and on and on.

The younger brother, sitting up in the front pew, was getting hot under the collar about how the minister was not fulfilling his promise, but during the service there was not much he could do about it. He could only wait and hope that the minister would keep his end of the bargain. Finally, after about ten minutes of outlining the rich man's flaws, the minister concluded his message in a booming crescendo proclaiming:

"Yes my friends, this man was a no-good, dirty, rotten scoundrel! But, compared to his brother, he was a saint!"

Ok – all kidding aside, do you know what the shortest verse in the Bible is? "Jesus wept." John 11:35. Can you imagine? Jesus Christ himself – God incarnate – Emmanuel, God with us – wept. Jesus, the Son of God can be moved to tears... Anybody relate?

How appropriate, to talk about the grief of Jesus on All Saints Day. I thought that since All Saints Day falls on Sunday this year – today, that is – we'd spend a bit more time on it than in other years.

All Saints' Day is one of the most underrated church holidays of the year. Its more glamorous cousins tend to overshadow it -- All Hallows Eve and Thanksgiving -- kind of like how Holy Saturday gets lost in Holy Week.

All Saints' Day is one of only two days set aside during the year to tend to our grief. The other one is the Blue Christmas service.

Sure, we do grief on Good Friday, but that grief is for the suffering and death of Christ and the grand theology that goes with it.

All Saints Day is for us, for remembering the people we loved, who were important to us, who impacted our lives, then died, leaving a gaping hole in our

lives. On All Saints Day, we gather in this sanctuary and let our grief bind us together in a new and powerful way.

Most of our departed loved ones had a funeral, but funerals happen right after the loss when our emotions are completely chaotic, not to mention the practical stuff we have to manage.

If you have lost someone close to you, if you remember it at all, you probably remember it as a fog of confusion -- hundreds of details: notifying friends, organizing the service -- wills and estates, the unpredictable family emotions, like a pressure cooker. Frankly, it's not really a good time to treasure any memory of the departed.

This is where All Saints' Day comes in. There's no chaos, no arrangements to be made, no being singled out to sit at the front of the church, no endless line of well-meaning folks to shake hands with.

We are all in it together, and those we are remembering are long settled in their resting places. It's a chance to be private about our grief, taking out our memories in the quiet of our hearts and turning them over one by one, taking our time to remember and reflect.

But we all enter that private heart-space at the same time, in the same place. As you bring up the faces of your loved ones in your mind's eye, peacefully and uninterrupted, your neighbor is doing the same. We enter the valley of the shadow of death together, and walk through it in solidarity with each other.

In today's gospel, we see him in the exact situation we've faced in our own lives—the inevitable, painful death of a loved one. Lazarus had been sick, they all knew he might die. But Jesus, it seems, doesn't want to believe it. Hoping against hope, "He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep."

Jesus saw so much pain in his lifetime – the life and spirit of his people

crushed by Roman occupation; five thousand poor and hungry on a hillside without food; people tormented by demons, bleeding or paralyzed or diseased for years. He goes on about his ministry without tears.

But here, he breaks -- Nothing grand or dramatic. Simply, one of his dearest friends gets sick and dies. And Jesus weeps.

So maybe, on a day like All Saints' Day, we can be in solidarity with Jesus as much as he is with us. He always bears the burden for us. Maybe today we can say, "Jesus, we understand. We're sorry for your loss, and we love you. Come sit with us for a while and we'll all be in this together."

But Jesus brought his friend back. How did he do it? How did Jesus bring Lazarus back from the dead? By calling his name. "Lazarus, come out!" Today, we're going to do something similar. We're calling out the names of loved ones, and they're resurrected in our hearts, right here, right now.

The custom of All Saints' Day is to remember those who have died. Fair enough, but there's more: It gives us a moment to grieve those we have lost but also to move to thanksgiving for their life and, even more, for their place now among the saints gathered in the nearer presence of God.

But as we call out names and ring our bells, let's expand our vision. The kind of loss that demands notice and deserves comfort comes from many places – not just death.

- It comes in leave-takings, as we depart for a new job and/or home and leave beloved friends and colleagues behind.
- It comes as we slowly lose a loved one to Alzheimer's or dementia.
- It comes from struggles with illness of both body and mind.
- It comes in the loss of employment or dignity.
- It comes from the exhaustion of care-giving – for a spouse, a parent, or a special needs child – and the occasional recognition of all things given up in order to offer that care.

- It comes in the would'a, could'a, should'a's, -- the things that might have been, in the life of an alcoholic or addict – the “if only's.” We're not supposed to think about those, but there they are...

The book of Revelation is a letter of encouragement written for the early Christians. I submit to you that the 'saints' that we read about aren't just those robed in white, gathered in triumph. No – it's us – as we also gather, just as we are: our robes stained and torn from our own ordeals -- large and small.

And in Revelation 21:4 we find an amazing promise -- the promise that, “...he will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...”

Promises are funny things. They don't just describe a thing, they can actually create the reality they're naming. Promise your kids you'll play a board game after work and the pieces are out and set up after dinner!

Here are some other promises for you today:

God loves you. I may have mentioned that before. But God also sees you. God knows the grief that's weighing down your hearts. God is there and understands the depression or the addiction or whatever is oppressing you. God knows the challenges you're facing and the uphill battles in your path. God sees you. God blesses you, and God walks with you; every step of the way.