

## All Saints Sunday

November 1, 2020

“The Cloud of Witnesses”

Psalm 34:1-10, 22 ~ Joshua 3:7-17 ~ Matthew 5:1-12

Today we celebrate “All Saints” Sunday. In the first few centuries, the church began to set aside certain days for remembering martyrs and saints ... their exemplary lives and courageous deaths. But before long, there were more saints to celebrate than days in the year. And everybody knew, since saints don’t call attention to themselves, there had to be a number of unnamed and unremembered saints. So, the church set aside one day a year to remember all the saints.

Protestants aren’t high on saints as a rule. We don’t want anything to confuse our primary relationship with God through Christ. And we believe every Christian is a saint, or at least called to live as one. But we do have our heroes. We do remember our friends. All Saints is a fitting day for us to celebrate the good company God has given us for making our spiritual journey.

Therefore, we gather today to worship God and to remember the saints who have gone before us at Oakland Christian UCC in Suffolk, VA. “Remembering” is one of the most important – perhaps THE most important of spiritual endeavors. Again

and again, the psalmists urge Israel to remember the gracious works of God. Again and again, the prophets complain that Israel has forgotten God and in forgetting God, forgotten who they are, like the victims of some terrible amnesia: lost, disoriented, confused, clueless. The Bible often recites short histories of the exemplary souls who have gone before us, like the “cloud of witnesses” in that famous chapter on faith in the Book of Hebrews. To remember their lives is to learn from their model, and more than that, to pick up their work as our own and extend it into our own time. Faithfulness is all about memory and community and continuity. The central ritual of Christian worship is the simple sharing of bread and wine that we will celebrate today which Jesus commanded we do “in remembrance of him.” To remember Jesus is to know him present again ... to connect with him ... to let him continue his life and love and work through us.

Memory is a means of immortality. Most of us want to be remembered when we are gone. We want some part of our selves to live on in those we love. Following an unsuccessful political campaign in the winter of 1841, Abraham Lincoln fell into a depression so deep that friends feared he might be suicidal. In Team of Rivals, Doris Kearns Goodwin tells how his best friend Joshua Speed warned Lincoln if he did not rally, he would probably die. Lincoln replied he was more than willing to die to escape his misery, except “he had done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived” According to Goodwin, in his time of

despair Lincoln was driven forward mainly by his desire to engrave his name in history. She writes: “Unable to find comfort in the idea of a literal afterlife in heaven, he found consolation in the conviction that in the memories of others, some part of us remains alive.”

Of course, Abraham Lincoln was remarkably successful in engraving his name in history as an American immortal. But he was not alone in wanting to live forever in the memory of his people. In every generation there are people who want most of all to make a name for themselves. Some wish to do so mainly for personal recognition and power. But most genuinely wish to do something of lasting benefit and meaning to the world. We all want our lives to matter in the end.

This belief in immortality through memory is deeply wired in some cultures which consider it the primary responsibility of the living to maintain the memories of their ancestors. After all, the dead far outnumber the living and if there were none left living, who would remember the dead? They would be truly dead forever. In those cultures, dying without children is a tragedy not just because no one is left to carry forward the family name but because no one is left to carry forward the family memory, so that all the generations who have gone before die as well.

Remembering is also a means of continuing the work of those who have lived before us and making their lives and their deaths more meaningful. I think of

Mothers Against Drunk Driving, an organization of parents who have lost children in alcohol related accidents. What death could be more tragic and meaningless ... unless somehow the living use their memory to save others from a similar tragedy?

50 years ago John and I stood over the sunken battleship Arizona in Pearl Harbor, where, as you know, over a thousand American sailors died suddenly in a surprise attack on December 7th, 1941 by the imperial forces of Japan. The United States was withholding oil and other vital supplies from the Japanese leaders who were greedy to expand their empire and economy, so they decided to attack us. We stood in that holy place with fellow Americans and people of other nations, including many Japanese, remembering the price of freedom and the cost of greed and war. Even today drops of oil still rise to the surface from the ship like so many tears. That is the power and the importance of memory. As long as there is a United States of America I think we will remember those who lost their lives in service to our country that day, but I worry whether we will remember the other lesson about the human costs of war and greed and empire building.

Memory is a vaporous thing. Time and age play tricks on us. We forget too easily ... too conveniently ... the lessons of our past ... and the people who have shown us the better way. We remember in ways most beneficial to our present purposes,

whether or not those memories are true. It's not just *that* we remember but *how* we remember those who have gone before us that condemns or redeems their lives.

It has been proven time and time again that those who don't learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. To put it more positively, those who live after us have the opportunity to correct our mistakes and build on our benefits. I think it was Pablo Picasso who said, "Take from the altar of the past not the ashes, but the fire." The full meaning of our lives is not revealed until our descendants remember us and interpret us to good effect.

How shall we remember the saints who surround us in this place? Nowhere like in a church do we see that the boundary between the living and the dead is not fixed, but fluid. The cloud of witnesses is here with us every time we gather. As they are with God, and we are with God, we are all here together with God in this place. Every brick has somebody's name on it, dear people who lived and sacrificed not only for us, but for those who will follow us. How shall we build on their work, refine it, redeem it, interpret it, make their lives mean even more and ennoble our own lives in the process? And who will remember us when we are gone, and what will they remember about us?

We are only passing through. We are made of mortal stuff. The world is full of

ruins, churches that have risen and thrived and disappeared, cities, communities, civilizations, great peoples.... We remember some of them. But most are buried in the sands of time, and mostly they are forgotten.

Most of us will live on briefly in the memory of those who love us. A few of us will be remembered by several generations. Maybe we will be remembered longer collectively, for a war we fought in, for a good work we did together, for the institutions or communities or nation we helped build. Perhaps one or two of us will be remembered a hundred years from now, our name on a book we wrote or in a record preserved in some public archive. But we cannot depend on human memory to preserve our lives and improve on their meaning because all the people who follow us will soon join us in mortality, too. As the prophet Isaiah observes, “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.” The prophet despairs: “Surely the people are grass.” But then he has this revelation, this “aha” moment of exhilaration: “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isa 40:8) Who will remember our beloved saints who have gone before us? Who will remember us when we are gone? Who will remember when those who follow us are gone and no one is left to remember them? God will remember. God will remember. We will live forever in the mind and heart and memory of God.

So today we remember our saints with thanksgiving. But more importantly we remember them to God. God alone owns the word “forever.” God alone is eternal. Before anything else was, God was. And when everything else is gone, God will still be. And we will still be remembered by the One who loves us and gave himself for us. This is our hope. And this is why it matters whom and how we remember today.

We are a people of the Spirit, which is not some ethereal unreal quality antithetical to God’s flesh and blood material creation. Rather, God’s Spirit has entered and transformed the material world through the flesh and blood of Christ which we remember whenever we share communion. Every breath, every flower, every rainy day, every rainbow, every sunrise, every sunset lives eternally in the memory of God. And so do we. And so do our saints. So let us remember them well and let us remember them to God. May we pray?

Eternal God,

From generation to generation your love has watched over us. Bless our memories today with recollection of the great souls who have lived among us. Raise up a new generation who will correct our failures and continue this good work. As we commend them to you, inspire us to labor in faithfulness through our time, and

bring their lives with ours to completion in your perfect will through Jesus Christ  
our Lord. Amen.