

Sermon for Sunday, November 6, 2022

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

All Saints Sunday

“Alive in God”

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Decorah, Iowa

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

When a loved one dies, it's so hard to hear others refer to them in the past tense. As people say all sorts of kind things - "She was so generous", "She was really funny" - it hits you again. "She was" means she is no longer alive.

It's also hard to know which tense you want to use when referring to a loved one. After the death of a spouse do you say, "Today is our wedding anniversary," or "Today would have been our wedding anniversary? Do you say, "We have three children," or "We had three children and our son died ten years ago?" Referring to our loved ones in the past tense can be so painful. We want them to be present in our lives, and we want our speech to reflect that.

Jesus says that God uses the present tense when speaking to Moses about his ancestors who have died. In the story Jesus is referencing, God says to Moses, "I AM the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." God doesn't say, "I once was the God of your ancestors back when they were alive and I remember them well," but rather, "I AM the God of your ancestors." Jesus says God doesn't have to use the past tense for those who have died for they are alive to God. The dead are raised and live now as children of God, children of the resurrection.

Jesus' words here raise many questions and don't offer any easy answers. Instead, they evoke a beautiful mystery beyond our comprehension. Those who have died do not only inhabit the past. They live now in the presence of God, in the heart of God. This is not because they are so worthy, but because they are considered worthy through the love and faith and action of Christ Jesus. Because of Christ, we all have a place in the resurrection, a place in God's life, now and always. This means we can still think of our relationships with our departed loved ones in the present and future tenses. All of us are now held in God's heart; so in some way, we are still together. And we will be together in God in the age to come.

The end of life here is not the end of love, connection, intimacy with God and one another. We still have a future together. The good news is that this future is not just a continuation of life here on earth with all its sin, sorrow, and brokenness. As Jesus says, those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, but in the age to come everything will be different. Our relationships and all aspects of our life together will be transformed. We will know new ways of being in relationship, new ways of being together with all the children of God.

For instance, in the age to come, women won't be the property of men as they were in Jesus' day. So, no one will need to wonder what will happen to a woman who had many husbands and no children. Who gets to claim her in the resurrection? Only our loving God! She, and all those who've suffered oppression, will finally share in the fullness of life that God longs for them to know. All the other things that mar relationships here - abuse, scorn, contempt, addiction, absence, isolation - will be healed and transformed. We will all share in such fullness of life, together in the heart of God.

This is God's intention for all creation: wholeness, communion, the healing of all divisions in the presence of God. This is God's future, this is our future. Yet that can seem so remote right now. Sin and rupture and death seem so powerful, so forceful, so ever present. That's why All Saints Sunday is such a gift. In many ways, it's a thin place. Celtic Christians use the term "thin place" to describe places and times where the boundary between heaven and earth feels more permeable, when we experience God more fully.

On All Saints Sunday we get a foretaste of God's promised future. We also enter the thin and mysterious space between life and death, between what is and what is yet to come. We get to linger in the mystery: As we honor our grief while we practice hope; and as we experience the presence of the whole communion of saints, that great cloud of witnesses from every time and place who surround us always.

As names are read, candles lit, bells tolled, we have sensory experiences with these saints who have gone before. Throughout worship, we see the lights of these people shining around us. As we prepare to receive communion, we sing the song that saints are always singing in God's presence when we sing Holy, Holy, Holy God. As we sing, somehow our voices are united with the church on earth, the choirs of angels and all the hosts of heaven; we join in their unending hymn. Then, we gather at the communion rail, on our half of the circle. And somehow, in a beautiful mystery, the healed, resurrected saints who have gone before us fill in the other half of the circle.

Whenever we gather for worship, we get a glimpse of this mystery, of this communion we share; but on All Saints Sunday it is even more pronounced. So, linger here beloved saints of God. Experience the good news that God's promised future is breaking into our world even now.

Death does not win, those who have died live still in God. We are still with them, even now; we still have a future together. Sin will not define us; all our relationships will be healed and transformed. Sorrow does not have the last word, love will prevail.

Here and now, in the present tense, God is working to let us experience this so that our living now will be changed, so that our world now will be changed.