

THE LESSON: Revelation 21:1-6a
THE GOSPEL: John 11:32-44

All Saints Sunday
November 4, 2018

“For All The Saints”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace be to you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

A Lutheran’s definition of a saint is somewhat controversial. Our brothers and sisters in faith have other processes, especially for the Roman Catholic Church to determine sainthood. But you and I have a working definition of being a saint, as Luther and others in this tradition have said. A saint is a forgiven sinner.

So with that we have a confidence for God’s love for this world that even though we know we have not measured up to the glory of God, God’s righteousness, God’s right acting, God’s love for you and for me redeems and brings us into this beautiful saintly life. We may not always feel like it. We as people who are living have a certain challenge, a certain bondage to time, we are aware of time, we know that at some point in our life that there will be death. Luther had said that every person must do two things alone, his own believing and his own dying.

If I had a mug of beer with Martin Luther, I would maybe say, “You know what, that’s interesting, but I don’t think you do those things alone. I think you do those things even here in our believing and trusting in God, we need encouragement from one another. Certainly in our dying we need encouragement with and for one another.

On a practical basis, I just lift up the ministry of hospice. I have already mentioned it since I have been here this month, but hospice is such a wonderful, practical, tactical expression of confidence in God’s love in wonderful ways. It was a blessing for Deborah and I for her mother. When you have that last medical intervention and no one is quite sure what to do, and then the conversation came and I was thankful for that doctor. It’s a strange statistic that the average length of time on hospice in many hospital systems is less than two weeks, quite often closer to four days. It sounds like I am blaming doctors, but just saying part of their ministry is to keep on going, right? To propose new and other ways to heal, but sometimes what is needed is God’s healing through death. An honest part of my ministry is to encourage people to be on hospice for six months or a year. Sometimes people that are in hospice thrive, isn’t that amazing when there is no longer an acute clinical focus, but love and nurturing, great care. I just lift it to you, hospice is nothing to be afraid of. Two, a practical issue is if you have any skills or compassion at all, hospice is a wonderful volunteer ministry to attend to. I would love to talk to you more about that.

Death is stressful, so of course comedians jump in on these issues. Woody Allen said this, he is not afraid of death, he just doesn’t want to be there when it happens. Maybe you have heard of that statistic, the fear of public speaking is worse than the fear of death. Have you heard that? The stress that comes from that, so Jerry Seinfeld said it this way – if that’s true, the fear of public speaking is worse than death that for the average person, it’s better to be in the casket than giving the eulogy. Those are ways to kind of make light of something that’s so important. But I wanted to give some practical encouragement for us as people of faith.

New to our community of course, I did not know most of the people, perhaps you knew every single person whose name was listed. It is so important to take time to pause and to honor those who have passed. It's a statement of solidarity, it's a statement of hope, it's a statement of a clear understanding of God's love. So I wanted to say it in this particular way, that often we think of life that something has started and kind of pushes off and will fail at the end, but God's love is really quite marvelous. God's love, as I unpacked the Gospel that's proclaimed through all three readings here, is God's love yes started and created this dynamic of life, but God's love is also coming towards us. God has all the time covered in love, and we as time bearers often don't see it coming our way. Let me see if I can edify you by these statements.

On this mountain, the Lord of all hosts will make for all people a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wines, rich food filled with marrow of well aged wines, strained clear. He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that has cast over all people, the sheet that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever. Isn't that just a marvelous statement of the clarity, this feast as the metaphor is used in the Isaiah text, The feast of food, God's appetite is to swallow and take away death by swallowing and will wipe away all tears from faces and it will be that we have waited for him. This is the Lord for whom we have waited, let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. God's future is moving towards us in ways that are so difficult to hold onto in a world that moves so quickly.

The Revelations text when I use that word, a lot of people get scared right away and they think of all the prophetic utterances, but sometimes I feel like I haven't done a good enough job as a pastor, well I hope with this congregation I will, which is Revelations is good news. This is chapter 21, *And I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more, and I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Prepared as a bride, adorned for her husband, and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying "See the home of God is among mortals, he will dwell with them, they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away. And this simple line that I just love, in Revelations, See I am making all things new. That's a beautiful and simple statement and that is for all of creation, but that's also for you and for me, the joy of knowing that even in our death, that's not the end of the story, God's love coming towards, clearly and confidently, this is true.*

Luther did say it this way, *this is true, we are all beggars at the end of this life*, and that is a simple way to say it, that we can't do it on our own, but this begging is with the most extravagant and generous of all givers, Jesus Christ our Lord. So this movement is so important for us to know.

The transitions of life are so difficult, I'll just speak bluntly about the fear of death. For many it's the fear of pain and suffering. So I do lift up palliative care, I lift up hospice care, I lift up the joy of the ministry of this church to make sure that no one is left alone. It is an important time of witnessing, that we are not scared, that we are able to enter into another person's life and their suffering, and to bring meaning and purpose by even just the moment of sharing, holding hands and being a witness. It is difficult work, but this fear of pain and suffering, I lift up the joy of knowing about hospice care. Can I dare say "the joy of hospice care" but it is this in tune to the needs of each person and no longer attempting to rescue but, bringing comfort. Let hospice care pervade your thoughts for your life.

Fear of the unknown, many of us are afraid of what happens. So that's why you have these weekly things called worship services, to get reminded. Pastors talk about readings from Isaiah, and readings from Revelation, and say there is nothing to fear. It may be more mysterious than you and I would like.

I was having fun at the Men's Breakfast this week, we got into a fun little discussion about the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A couple guys gave their opinions about how they would explain that, so I kind of joshed them a little bit. I said, "I'm so sorry, what you are saying is a heresy and I need to point you out to the bishop when she comes here on Sunday. I am just going to point to you and say that's the guy who is heretical." The reason it gets so easy to be heretical about these things, it's relational. I can try to explain to you, I can try to structurally represent the Trinity, and I will always fall short because it is based upon a loving relationship. So the love of God is far more like a Greek dance than any triangle I have ever seen. If you have ever had that experience of being in a big Greek wedding or a great big Greek celebration and you dance, you don't have to be a good dancer, you just kind of go around and yell this word Opa to life. I think maybe you would discover a drink called ouzo, stay away from that, but the Opa is fine. It's to life, and that is true, God is making all things new, so I ask you to claim and cling to these promises of what God is bringing in the future towards us. Our existence ending is fearful for many of us of course, *Be still and know that I am God* is the phrase that God will swallow up death forever.

Pastors are kind of a funny lot, we'll talk about goofy things out on the golf course. I was with a pastor friend, Glenn, in Nebraska, we were playing golf. We were just talking about a bunch of stuff. I said something to the effect "You know, when I die, it will be a great loss." Glenn said, "You know what, it will be sad during the funeral, but when I start smelling that ham, the scalloped potatoes and the green beans, I think I'll be able to make it."

We continue to live in this mystical body called the church and our investment in those who are younger, our love for those who are older, the existence for you and I. I had heard that Pastor Chuck had preached a spunky sermon about death, and the finality of death. I'll put my input to it, which is what's helpful to remember there is as simple as this. When you are birthed, how much effort did you put into your birth? You may say a lot, but it was by grace that you were created, it was by grace that you were birthed. This statement "To take your new breath as this phrase came "Lazarus, come out."

I have full faith and confidence that as God has delivered me into this life that God will call me into life eternal. I don't have it all slick into this is this stage and this is this stage, I just know I can trust God. I know that I can trust God for your life, that as saints, as forgiven sinners, that when God calls us, we will respond with the joy of a life eternal. It may be dead and really dead, and moving away from this idea of the soul going to heaven, although that's been around for the last 500-600 years. The reason pastors get weird about this is because the power of the resurrection to reunite here on earth, to resurrect, to stand again, is not just the complete story to float away, to be in heaven. It is a new heaven and a new earth here, a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven from God, so it is as simple as this – earth comes to heaven. This earth is recreated and back to its original design. I want all of that, I don't want to be simply away, I want to be in the new life that God will resurrect here.

Many people are afraid of eternal punishment. I was with pastors this past week and there was a statistic that was discussed. If you ask a Lutheran this question – how much work have you accomplished for your own salvation? The average respondents, about half the Lutherans would say "I need to put more work into it. I need to do better." So this fear of punishment, this fear of not living life right, can bind so many of us. I have a silly joke about this – I worked with Creighton University when I was becoming a pastor, and with some of their priests that they had. Their whole emphasis is that in death that you are at a point

of perfection, so right before you pass there is this element of a ritual to make sure that you have confessed your sins and are in a very perfect position. One of the priests said, "This is harder than you think." He was working with one of his Catholic members, and this person had lived a bad life, but they completed the statement of forgiveness and reconciliation. A beautiful nurse came in the room, leaned over to take his blood pressure, and as the priest was leaving, the gentleman said, "Father, I have sinned again." (Laughter) So it is hard and I make fun of that, but if that's your emphasis to end your life at a state of perfection, that's a difficult journey, that won't yield you. What yielding to God's righteousness will yield you, a sense of comfort and calm. The eternal punishment, the separation from God is not God's call for you and for me.

This last one – what will become of my loved ones? Many people are afraid of their death because of what will happen. I just have two simple words for you – what an opportunity to continue to invest into the people you love. Yes, to be a good steward. Yes, to raise your children well. Yes, to have forgiveness and reconciliation. Without a doubt, one of the most difficult things as a pastor is to see people hanging on to their loved one who is ready to go and wanting them to live against hope because they are not reconciled to each other in love. So you do as much as you can to reconcile, but now is the time for reconciliation, to seek forgiveness, to love and to serve one another. That's one point – don't leave things that should be done now. And the second is, we have a resilient God and we have resilient people. The people that you love and you care for will step forward because we will be with them and others will come alongside. This understanding and grieving is my last point. One of the challenges for our culture is grieving should be done quickly because you kind of have three days off maybe as a benefit, or maybe five days off as a benefit for your workplace. But grieving takes a lot longer than that. The denial, the anger, the bargaining with God and with oneself, the anxiety, the sadness, the disorientation, all of these things – these are transitional griefs. So it is in a strange and awesome way the price of love. In our grief, I wanted to end with this – I love Jesus. That verse 35 can be translated into the shortest verse. Jesus wept. I love that we have God with us. That in our tears, in our hearts being broken, in our disorientation, that Jesus comes with, comes alongside, that you and I have the opportunity to come alongside Jesus and to be with people who just need someone to sit with them. This fantastic affinity Immanuel, God is with us. I just ask you to rely upon this beautiful understanding of God's love does not diminish it, it is amplified.

It may be true that we are all beggars but we are begging for the right thing, which is the love of God and God's love will come through. I just want to remind you that in our understanding of life that hospice ministry is important, I encourage you to take a deep look for loved ones and yourself and certainly to volunteer. I ask you to continue to have an understanding that God's love is coming towards us, so God's love is not fading out. God's love is coming towards us. The new Jerusalem, where death is destroyed, where heaven comes upon earth where there will be death no more, but even now as we have mourning and crying and pain, we have the opportunities to witness with and for each other with a God who loves us intensely and weeps with us. That doesn't solve the problem of death, this mystery of death and life eternal is that I want to hear that same message, I want to hear it when Jesus says, "Lowell, come out." I want to hear that, I want you to be able to hear that. Because that is God's future coming towards us. In Jesus name. Amen