All Saints Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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November 4th, 2018

I *love* this Sunday. It might seem a strange thing to suggest that *this* day — All Saints Sunday — is one of my favorite holy days on the liturgical calendar. One of two days that confronts our human mortality and the inevitability of death head-on.

First, there’s Ash Wednesday, where we are honest about our human condition, our sin, our brokenness, our frailty — marking our foreheads with ashes and proclaiming that we are dust.

Today, there’s All Saints, where we remember the saints of the church and the saints of our own lives, particularly those who have died in the past year. We read their names out loud, we light candles, we ring bells. Often, we even bring photographs of departed loved ones and set them alongside icons of saints as a sort of altar of remembrance.

This year, I remember two saints of the church, who have long since died, but whose lives and memory have resurfaced in recent days.

On October 14, after a lengthy process of many years, Pope Francis formally canonized Óscar Romero as a saint. As a priest and ultimately as the Archbishop of San Salvador, Romero spent his life and ministry speaking out against government oppression, military violence, and the violation of basic human rights in his home country of El Salvador. On March 24, 1980, Romero’s activism got him assassinated, but his legacy as a martyr and advocate for human rights and social justice continues to inspire many in the Latin American church *and beyond* to this day.

Then, on October 26, twenty years after his death, Matthew Shepard was at long last laid to rest at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. In October 1998, Shepard was violently beaten, tortured, and left to die on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming, in an act of hate, purely for who Shepard was as a gay man. At his memorial service just days ago, retired Episcopal bishop Gene Robinson, himself the first openly gay bishop of the Episcopal Church, closed his homily with these words: *“I have three things I want to say to Matt: Gently rest in this place. You are safe now. Welcome home.”* Not unlike St. Óscar Romero, Matthew Shepard, too, is a *saint*, from whom many, particularly in the LGBTQIA+ community, myself included, draw great strength and inspiration.

Together with our own loved ones and all the saints from all times and in all places, we remember Romero and Shepard who have taken their place among the hosts of heaven as part of the communion of saints.

The Book of Common Prayer from our Episcopal and Anglican siblings in faith reminds us what it means to confess, as we do in the words of Apostles’ Creed, this thing we call “the communion of saints”: *“The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.”*

*The communion of saints is the* ***whole*** *family of God, the living* ***and*** *the dead.* ***We remember the saints who have died, and we draw strength from them, from their faith, from the witness of their lives.***

And the communion of saints is not just the faithful departed whose names we read aloud today. *The communion of saints is* ***the livin****g and the dead. The communion of saints is* ***us too****.*

***In times of grief, we draw strength from the communion of saints as we lament the brokenness of our world and our human frailty and mortality.***

Our gospel reading this morning bears witness to this. These verses come from nearly an entire chapter of John’s gospel dedicated to one story, commonly called the raising of Lazarus. That is indeed the ending of story, but it’s only a small sliver of what happens: ***First****, Mary weeps. She grieves that Jesus didn’t come sooner. Her religious community joins her grief and weeps with her. And Jesus, seeing all this, becomes greatly disturbed and deeply moved. Jesus, too, begins to weep.* ***This is a community collectively gathered to weep and to mourn their brother Lazarus’s death because grief is not a thing that has to happen alone.***

In times of grief, we rely on the communion of saints to mourn and lament with us. This past week at the ELCA Churchwide offices, we hosted a special service of prayer in solidarity with our Jewish siblings who have been grieving the loss of life at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At that same service, we also lamented the murder of Maurice Stallard and Vickie Lee Jones, both black, shot in an act of hate while shopping for groceries.

It’s a thing of grief itself to have two examples of communal lament from the past two weeks alone. But it is a source of strength to see the church, at its best, join in collective grief, lament, and mutual support. *This is the communion of saints.*

*We do not grieve alone.*

*We do not lament alone.*

*We do not weep alone.*

Like Mary at the tomb of Lazarus, we are joined by a whole community of saints in the church who grieve and lament and weep with us. *And we are joined too, most especially, by our Savior Jesus who weeps with us.*

Jesus weeps with us for those, like St. Óscar Romero, who give their lives for the cause of justice. Jesus weeps with us for Matthew Shepard and all who are martyred for just being who they were created to be. Jesus weeps with us for the children of God at the Tree of Life synagogue and at the Kroger grocery store in Jeffersontown, Kentucky, and all who lose their lives to acts of hate.

It’s a powerful thing to have a God who weeps with us, the communion of saints. But we also know that there’s more to the story: *“Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out.*

***We know that death is not the final word*** because we confess the communion of saints *and the resurrection of the body*. Death *and resurrection*.

This is one of my favorite days in the church year because we remember our mortality *and more*. We pause and we reflect on the saints who have died. We draw strength from the witness of their lives, and we draw strength from those who still surround us in the flesh. And finally, but not least of all, we draw strength from our Savior Jesus who at once pauses to weep with us, greatly disturbed and deeply moved by grief, *but who also promises that he is* ***the resurrection and the life***. Life, not death, is the final word.

Thanks be to God.