

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today is one of the heavier liturgical days of the year. Not as heavy as Ash Wednesday or Good Friday, but it does raise varied emotions. Today, we name aloud those who have died. No longer is their memory only in our heads and hearts during worship, but we are conjuring up their image, their gifts, and their presence among us in this service.

While preaching on this day can be tender, I find today to be harder than most years. You see, this last week as we were compiling the names of your beloved friends, family, and ancestors of faith so that we can honor them in a few moments, I became speechless. In past years we have received somewhere between 15-30 names. This year, we have 70 names, so I know that we are holding loss in overwhelming quantities today.

And on All Saints Day we could easily say, “We remember 70 people today,” and we could move on. But it’s far too easy to glaze over with numbers. After all, I don’t think our brains can really comprehend the devastation of these lives lost. When we hear 18 have died in a mass shooting in Maine, or when 157 have died in a Nepal earthquake, or 10,600 who died in the Israel-Hamas war – how do we fathom that

loss? How do we acknowledge the lives that have ended, lives that have changed, and the impact on the community with only a number?

That is why one Sunday each year, we slowly name the beloved ones who we mourn. We remember that each name and toll of the bell is more than a number. Each name was a person dear to you. A person who loved you and was loved by you. A person who cared for you or was cared by you. A person who might have been you sibling, your friend, or your lover. A person who shaped you, who formed you, and who taught you.

And, we also remember that today is more than about a person. For in times of death, the fullness of loss and grief is exposed. We begin to grieve losses that don't even seem connected to the person directly. We grieve the changes in our own physical and mental state. Our brains are hijacked with thoughts about our own mortality, or the loss of a significant relationship, or the loss of what could have been. You see, on this day, it's more than a number and it's more than a name, it's a reflection of God's presence in your life.

On this Sunday where we remember those who have died, it's odd that the lectionary chose the words from Jesus' sermon on the mount. After all, this isn't a text about death nor is it a popular funeral reading. It was likely chosen because of verse 4, which reads, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." In these beatitudes, we come across nine declarations of blessedness. And Warren Carter reminds us that, it's not describing nine different kinds of good people who go to heaven. Rather, like everything else in Matthew, these blessedness statements are oriented to life together in the community of discipleship, not to individual ethics. Or, to put it in another way, mourning is not about personal grief, but rather it's the lament of the current state of the world and how far we've departed from God's vision. We are not holding up that pain, suffering, loss, and grief are good things. Rather, Jesus is saying that those who mourn the way that the world works, those that see that God's intention for all of creation is more than what we experience now, and that those who yearn for a time when God's love, justice, and peace are fully realized, well, those individuals *will* be vindicated. With absolute certainty, that time will come. The time when all will be well and good is a "sure thing." It is what the future holds in store.

It's that focus in today's gospel that makes it an ideal text for All Saints Sunday. You see, saints are not just dead people who did extraordinary things, like St. Francis

starting a monastic order, or Saint Mary Magdelene as the first apostle sharing of the news of Jesus' resurrection. In fact, when we talk about saints, we aren't even talking about people who have died. Rather, we celebrate all the baptized—past, present, and even future. It's a moment where we give thanks for the ways God has, is, and will work through humanity to bring about God's vision.

That's why in a few short moments after we name those **70** individuals who have shaped us, we also name all those baptized this last year. Those saints that are among us right now, the saints that will shape the future of the church, and the saints that are to come in the years ahead. For what was made known in Matthew's text today is that we are a part of a community. We are not alone in bringing about God's vision where tears, pain, loss, and struggle are absent from our vernacular. That is why we create a shared altar of remembrance and we fill the font with water knowing that every time we gather here, we are gathering with all the saints. We gather at the font knowing we are a part of something that spans generations, centuries, and millennia's. We gather at this table remembering that the saints of all times and places are gather with us in this moment. While it might be hard to imagine this, it is a mystery of our faith—the mystery that as we gather here in a specific time and place we are also gathering with all of God's saints—those dead, those living, and those to come— knowing that God's vision of love, justice, and

peace is just around the corner. That we are not alone. That God is working through us to bring about eternal life.

So let us gather now name these beloved saints. Let us remember that every person - whether named aloud or held in our hearts, those known or unknown, those who are our friends and those whom we struggle to love –every person is God’s beloved.

May we come to see all creatures as God’s beloved. And, most importantly, on this All Saints Sunday, let us give thanks to our God who persists across all generations.

Our God who loves us, works through us, and liberates us to love all people this day and always. Amen.