

All Saints' Sunday

Matthew 5:1-5

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Today, November 1, is known as All Saints' Day or All Hallows' Day, Halloween, or Feast of All Saints. The origin of this Christian liturgical feast day goes way back to pagan times. **"The ancient Celts, who celebrated the major festival of Samhain around November 1, believed that the veil between worlds became especially permeable at this time"** People would light bonfires and wear costumes and masks to ward off ghosts that roamed the earth. In time, the Catholic Church made November 1 as All Saints' Day as a way of putting a "Christian" twist to a pagan celebration.

All Saints' Day is day for us to pause and remember the living who have died, saying their names aloud once more, and holding in our hearts their love and memories.

Jan Richardson, in her blog, The Painted Prayerbook writes: **"In something of that spirit, I find that these days offer an invitation to ponder the past. Not with a desire to return to it, or to second-guess it, but with a mindfulness of what has gone before, and perhaps to have a brief visit from the ghosts of What Might Have Been."**

This is why we are gathered here in Lake Ripley Cemetery on this cold fall morning, surrounded by the memory of our family, friends, neighbors and former community members.

It seems appropriate as 2020 draws to an end, that we remember the past months, and all that we have individually and collectively lost, lamenting with the ghosts of "What Might Have Been".

At the end of January, my mother, Elizabeth Wheeler died. What also died with her was a sense of purpose. My sister, Beth, had long been my mother's caregiver, making daily visits to be with my mom. You who have

been caregivers for a loved one, understand the added grief as your daily routine is forever changed, and you feel as sense of loss.

In March, we all found ourselves facing death, both literally and figuratively, in a new and unexpected ways due to the global pandemic which continues to impact us today.

Back on Sunday, March 15, we gathered in the sanctuary for worship, with the Session voting to cancel the next few Sunday services to help “flatten the curve”. Easter was a few weeks away. The Session voted to re-gather here in Lake Ripley Cemetery for our traditional Sunrise Communion Service. The pandemic, as we know now, had other plans.

In the following days and weeks, schools and universities closed sending students home, sports leagues from professional to high school ended their seasons and tournaments in mid-dribble, businesses were shuttered, graduation celebrations were postponed, family and social gatherings canceled. Even the way we gathered to remember our dead was impacted by the virus.

We all have lost so much over this past year, and we continue to as we head into the dark, cold winter months and our sacred holidays.

Think about the other things we have experienced as a loss this year? Some have lost their jobs and businesses. Others have lost their sense of security. Some people have lost their homes. Others have lost their health insurance. Some of us have lost part of our identity through the roles they have played at work, school, and in the community.

In his book, “A Grief Observed”, C.S. Lewis writes: “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”

And fear is what many of us are feeling, as it covers up our grief as we face an uncertain future.

I wonder if that is how Jesus disciples felt after his death? They were grieving his death. In his death, they had lost their identity as his followers? Out of fear of possible violence that the government might inflict on them as followers of this radical rebel who had dared to challenge the political leaders of Jerusalem, they sheltered in place, locking themselves behind doors. They faced an uncertain and unknown future. I imagined they also lost hope.

In the darkness of mind, spirit and heart caused by their grief, they waited for what and when and how?

Then, in the face of death, early in a morning, while it was still dark, when they could not clearly see their way, the women went to the cemetery, to visit a grave of their dead friend.

We know this story, don't we. Why do you look for the living among the dead? Do not be afraid. The one you seek is not here but has risen!

New life emerged from where death had been. Life always answers death. That is what we as followers of Jesus cling to and proclaim. Resurrection! New Life! Light shining in the darkest of times! Love conquering the power of evil!

This virus has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, and continues to do so. It has also claimed so much more, including our former way of living and lifestyles.

Friends, while we are here to remember and it is important for us to do so, if we simply lament the past, holding fast to our grief of "what might have been" and the fears of an unknown future, we will miss the resurrections still appearing even now in the midst of death.

No matter how much fear fills us as we realize the impact and power this overwhelming news of the countless deaths have had on our lives and on the world, we must work through our fear, break the silence and go and tell the resurrection story! Life always answers death! Love triumphs over hate! Truth is stronger than lies! The Light still shines in the darkness of evil! Because Christ is risen, and risen indeed!

We are the heralds of hope that a new day is about to dawn!

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Comforted, indeed!

Can I get a honk your horns as an "Amen"!