

Embrace the Stink

All Saint's Sunday

November 3, 2024

John 11:32-44

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Maybe you've not noticed, but the church is crowded today. Have you seen who is gathered with us?

You may think I'm being facetious, but if you look with the eyes of faith this morning you'll also see the crowds in the sanctuary. We see spouses and friends, parents and grandparents, siblings, extended family members who are so dear to us.

In our hearts we name those special friends missing from our midst: Dottie McClelland, who is, I believe, still dancing to "When the Saints Go Marching In." And there is Dave Norvell, as happy as he might have been sticking his toes in the Meramec River, along with Robert Baker, who has certainly found the best place to get a glass of good red wine in heaven. All of them are here, with Eric Henson leading them in song: "The Lord is blessing me, right now, O right now. The Lord is blessing me, right now, O right now. Woke me up this morning and started me on my way, the Lord is blessing me right now."

When Eric Henson died this summer, someone sent me a video of his retirement celebration at Woodlawn Chapel. There we were, just a few years ago, standing and singing that song. And along with us were so many who are not physically here today, but who now worship God face to face. They are now part of that great communion of saints we name today...

The Bobs, and Roberts, the John's, David's, Betty's. They are here as well. And so many more: Paul and Peggy, Dee, and Al, Howard, and Jim. I'm sure you see them now.

You might now have noticed, but sitting right here with us are my parents, Frank and Lois, my brother Cliff and my sister Mary. Cliff stands ready to play trumpet, while my mother is likely giving me what I can only call "the look." I can only imagine her asking me why the pastor is wearing blue jeans on a Sunday morning!

But the truth is we welcome today all those saints who "from their labors rest." We welcome them in our blue jeans because their presence among us instructs us in the work we must accomplish. Yes, mother, let me explain: the pastor is wearing blue jeans today because all of us have work to do.

The longer that I am in ministry, the more appreciation I have for the description of the church as the “communion of saints.” As the ancient Scots Confession reminds us, “We firmly believe that has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be...one company and multitude chosen by God who rightly worship and embrace the true faith in Jesus Christ, the head of the Kirk.” It is, the Scottish confessors cried, a communion, not of profane persons, but of saints who have claimed those “inestimable benefits,” and includes the both the chosen who are departed, the Kirk triumphant (and) those who yet live and fight against sin and Satan, and those who shall live hereafter.”

I was a still wet-behind the ears, not even ordained pastor serving in Pueblo, Colorado, when the church secretary knocked on my door to tell me a church member was dying and wanted to see a pastor. The senior pastor had taken off for a well-deserved month-long vacation, leaving me in charge of the church. This was the first of several times when it seemed as if the phone rang with news of a death when he was barely out the door. Unsure of what I should say or do, I did what every smart young pastor does: I grabbed a Bible and called my wife. Together we drove the two hours to Denver. I found the ICU unit and, after then spent ten minutes convincing the receptionist that I was indeed a pastor (no one ever says I look too young anymore). I walked in and found Betty, her husband and children, all huddled close and very sad. She was alert, but obviously close to death. I prayed that despite my inexperience somehow, I would find the words to represent the entire church who could not, obviously, be physically present in that room.

Unsure of what to say, and worried that I might even say the wrong thing, I felt the fever of grief in the room as I took Betty’s hand. My actions and whatever words I managed to stammer out seemed insufficient. Yet I came to offer the same promise Jesus provided outside that tomb in Bethany. “I am the resurrection and the life,” he says to Martha. “Those who believe in me, even though they died, they will live.” (John 11:25-26).

Not “I am the resurrection” someday, but “I am the resurrection and the life here, today, now.” That was the promise I could offer, and it was one that Betty knew and trusted, and experienced later that same day.

And it is a promise that surrounds us today. It is also the promise that calls us to the work involved in sustaining the communion of saints. It is a promise that reminds us we do not shirk from the work we are called to do.

That is the poignancy and richness of the comfort we receive on All Saint’s Day. But it is also a challenge. On this day, we give thanks and grieve for those who have gone before us, even as we lean forward listening to “the distant triumph song” that makes

hearts brave and strengthens arms. We are also challenged by the reminder, as Tom Long has said, that “In Christian theology, death is no friend, not capital D Death anyway. Small ‘d death’, which is biological death, can sometimes come as a friend, a relief from intense suffering. But capital D Death is a power pitted against all life, is in fact the destroyer of life, the breaker of promises, the slayer of love and communion. Death is not to be welcomed with an embrace but resisted against as the final enemy.”¹

Death, as those surrounding Jesus know, stinks. It has what a funeral director friend of mine says “a smell you never forget.” This where Jesus stands this morning. He stands on the border of death, fully aware that small D death has taken one he loves. There at the edge of the tomb he is confronted by the overwhelming stench of death and grief. At the threshold of the tomb, he is surrounded by Lazarus’ family and all those who are grieving.

More than that, however, he is rehearsing all of the actions that he will shortly face. What happens in John 11 is a foreshadowing of what Jesus soon encounters: a sealed tomb, the stench of death, the sounds of weeping, and a large stone blocking the entrance. Jesus will soon face all of these—and while of course he will erase all of those actions, the stench of death will still linger in the air. Jesus confronts this stench, standing at the border between life and death. He is the voice of the good shepherd, knowing that his sheep will hear his voice.

And then...he weeps.

As those of us who were ever forced to memorize Bible verses know, John 11:35 in the King James Version is the shortest verse in the Bible: Jesus wept. That saved me several times in Sunday School. But the word is more complex than that. It is a specific word for weeping that is used only here in the New Testament, and is unlike other more common words for crying. It conveys a strong sense of agitation, even anger. Others in the story are crying, but John uses different words. Here Jesus stands agitated, perhaps because he understands that these events are a rehearsal of what he will also face.

As Jesus embraces the stink of death, he weeps because he knows that even his presence there cannot stop the powers of death. He will bring resurrection, of course, both now and later. He will indeed raise Lazarus to new life, yet Lazarus will live only to die again. Jesus weeps because he knows the deepest costs associated with death.

Jesus embraces the stink, by confronting the painful reality of death. And he offers the promise of eternal life – not only in time to come, but right here, right now. When we

¹ Tom Long, *The Good Funeral*, p. 223.

inhale the stench of death in any form, we remember that Jesus called forth Lazarus, and told those around him to strip away the layers of death.

This is also our challenge, and perhaps the most important reason we dare to wear blue jeans in church. We wear work clothes because Jesus is calling us to go to those who are weeping. We know that we will find him today at the threshold of death in our world. He stands before those tombs, calling the smelly dead to come out. He then invites the church to be us to be busy unwrapping the layers of death clothes. We go to release those who are confined by the garments of death, so that they may exchange them for the robes of resurrection.

On this All Saint's Day, Jesus calls us to face the stench, and to remember we do not do this alone. We are surrounded by a great communion of saints. Alleluia! And let the church say, "Amen."