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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/4/2012, All Saints Sunday
Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44
Comfort in Following the Saints

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

All Saints Sunday is a Sunday rich in themes. We can see two of them at play in this morning's readings. First, from our reading from the book of Revelation, we are offered comfort concerning those who have died in Christ. Especially we might cherish the words borrowed from Isaiah 25:

⁴[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:4 RSV)

This great theme of comfort is continued in our Gospel Lesson, where we read that He in whose hands we rest wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus and then restored the dead man to life. It seems to me that with those tears, our Lord Jesus sanctified human grief. It was as if he was saying to us, "We are human beings. We hurt sometimes, and we grieve sometimes, and even though we believe in the resurrection of the dead, it is alright for us to be deeply troubled and moved at the death of our loved ones."

I am much in the mood for this theme of comfort owing to a recent death in our parish. This past Monday, one of the mothers in our congregation died: Kathy Usiak, the daughter of Al and Vi Quirong and the mother of my former confirmation students David and Shauna. Kathy died in the midst of the storm, but not because of the storm, but rather because of a terrible illness. The hearts of all those who loved her are heavy, and I so I am eager to dive into the comfort offered us in our All Saints Bible Lessons.

But I mean to put that off until the second half of this sermon. In this first half, I want to focus on the other theme we can find in our readings. This one comes from the Prayer of the Day. It speaks of following the blessed saints "in lives of faith and commitment":

PRAYER OF THE DAY

☞ Almighty God, whose people are knit together in one holy Church, the body of Christ our Lord: Grant us grace *to follow* your blessed saints in lives of faith and

commitment, and to know the inexpressible joys you have prepared for those who love you; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen

This theme of imitating the saints is an honorable Lutheran stance on the saints. Our Lutheran position comes from Article 21 in the Augsburg Confession, which includes these lines:

... the saints *are to be remembered* so that we may strengthen our faith when we see how they experienced grace and how they were helped by faith. Moreover, it is taught that each person, according to his or her calling, should take the saints' good works as an example... However, it cannot be demonstrated from Scripture that a person should call upon the saints or seek help from them. (*Augsburg Confession*, Article XXI. "Concerning the Cult of the Saints." Kolb-Wengert)

So, my subject for this first part of the sermon is following the blessed saints in lives of faith and commitment.

DEACON TOM DORRIS

When I think of life in Christ, two images come to my mind. One concerns Deacon Tom Dorris. The other is about Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Here in our congregation, Davida Goldman recalls Tom Dorris, I am sure. But I am not sure than too many others recall him, for the congregation has naturally changed over the course of the many years since he died. I remember Tom, but what I remember even more firmly is Pastor Raymond Schulze's funeral sermon for Tom. Deacon Tom Dorris made a strong impression on many of us. In the funeral sermon Pastor Schulze expressed well the remarkable piety of that young man. Pastor Schulze prefaced his praise of Tom by saying that he, Pastor Schulze, did not mean to be impious or extravagant in praising Tom, but that nonetheless, he could not help but imagine that when Deacon Tom approaches the throne of grace on the great day of judgment, our Lord Jesus will be, as it were, startled and will exclaim, "Do I see double? For it seems to me that I perceive *myself* approaching."

What a lovely image, I thought. What a great thing to be able to say about someone: that that one was so Christlike that it would be hard to sort out the saint from Christ himself.

MOTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA

Now, my second image goes the other way around. This time, I am not referring to the resemblance between Christ and the saint, but rather the saint's tendency to see Christ wherever he looks, wherever she looks. This is a story about Mother Teresa of Calcutta. It is a story that comes from a recent book about her written by one of her confessor priests, Fr. Leo Massburg. In this story, Fr. Massburg is talking about his first impression of Mother Teresa when he was assigned to Calcutta to serve as priest in Mother Teresa's ministry. He said that he was particularly interested in the connection between Mother Teresa's devotional life and her practical life of ministry. The story goes thus:

... I sat down at a convenient angle from Mother Teresa in the chapel, just to watch how she prayed. She seemed to be totally absorbed while, with profound reverence, she sat kneeling on the floor or on a mat, eyes closed, now and again with her hands pressed into her face.

After a while I discovered that a photographer was nervously pacing up and down outside the chapel door. Evidently he wanted to speak with Mother Teresa but did not dare to go up to her and disturb her. Suddenly a Sister approached him and signaled that he should just approach her. He took off his shoes and went into the chapel, but hesitated to kneel down beside Mother Teresa. Now he will disturb her, I thought—curious as to how she would react.

She must have heard or sensed it when he knelt down beside her on the floor, for she looked up and welcomed him with a radiant smile. Her attention now belonged entirely to the photographer. He presented his business in a few words. She gave him an answer. He stood up and left the chapel. Before he was even outside, Mother Teresa was already completely and utterly immersed again in prayer.

What moved me so much about this short scene was that Mother Teresa gave not the slightest indication of displeasure or annoyance. On the contrary, it was as though the photographer had brought her a present by disturbing her at prayer. Only later did I understand that Jesus Himself was so present for Mother Teresa in the people

whom she met that she—coming out of prayer, and thus out of a lively conversation—simply shifted *from Jesus to Jesus*.¹

From “Jesus to Jesus.” It was as if every direction Mother Teresa looked, she saw Jesus. She had trained herself to take quite seriously the words of our Lord:

...*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.* (Matthew 25:35-36, RSV)

JESUS: OUR GOOD NEIGHBOR

Our Lord has told us where we might find him if we should like to show him some kindness in return for his great love for us. He is in the Church and he is in the poor neighbor. But churches go neglected in this world, and our neighbors go hungry, naked, lonely in prison and in sickness.

If one of our neighbors saved our life, we would consider him or her to be the dearest of people. We would honor that person, and figure that we owe all that we have - our selves, our time, and our possessions - to that good person. Dear ones, our Lord Jesus is such a good person. He is the Neighbor who gave everything to save us. And now he wanders around in this City, available for some show of gratitude from us. It cannot be right to be cold-hearted to the one who loves us so much.²

This, then, is the theme of the first part of this sermon: If we would follow the blessed saints in lives of faith and commitment, then let us train ourselves to see Jesus everywhere we look and to deal kindly with him.

You have been doing so, I am proud to say, during this aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. People of this congregation phoned or emailed me with offers to help other folks. I was grateful and moved by such offers. Also, you will see in today’s worship folder that we have given the address for Lutheran Disaster Response, for both the Missouri Synod and the ELCA. Many of us are grateful that our homes are okay, we never lost power, we have food and many blessings. I have sent a check off to the Disaster Response in gratitude for our blessings and in hope of helping others who suffer because of this storm. Let’s see Jesus everywhere we look, and try to treat him with love.

¹ Leo Maasburg, *Mother Teresa of Calcutta: A Personal Portrait*. Translated by Michael J. Miller (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, original German edition 2010) pages 2-3.

² I have borrowed this theme about Jesus as our good neighbor worthy of being treated kindly from my sermon for Lent 4B back in 1997.

COMFORT FOR THOSE WHO GRIEVE

My second theme concerns comfort for those who grieve. The saints try to follow Christ in lives of faith and commitment. That's the saints. Now let's look at the real thing: let's look at Jesus Christ himself.

"Lazarus, come out," cried Jesus. And what did the dead man do? He came out! Death lost its grip on the man. Life came flooding back into him. He walked out of that tomb and rejoined his sisters and all those who loved him.

How often we might have wished we could summon the dead from the grave. A few days ago I was terribly troubled because I had received the news that my niece might have died. The police were looking for her body along the river and by boat. I don't think I have been hit so hard by grief before. So I prayed most earnestly: "Save her, Lord. Save that child. Save her! Save her!" And I am so very grateful to say that she is indeed saved. She is home safe and sound.

Well, I had prayed with all my heart for her life. But Jesus did something greater than that: he did not pray for life, he summoned it! As he had done in the beginning when he summoned creation into being, so he summoned life back into Lazarus. "Lazarus, come out."

And why shouldn't Jesus have done that? Indeed it entirely natural that Jesus should raise Lazarus back to life, because, after all, Lazarus was his friend.

JESUS LEAVES ROOM FOR OTHERS TO HELP

Jesus could have done the entire job of saving his friend without help from anyone. But it was part of his compassion and wisdom that he invited other people into this mighty deed. For example, he knew, even apart from the word from Mary and Martha, that Lazarus was dying. Yet, he waited for their word before coming to the aid of his friend. This is a symbol for us that Jesus loves to hear our prayers. As Mary and Martha called to Jesus in their time of need, let us do the same. "Jesus, save her! save him!"

Again, he did not need to be told where the tomb was. He who is omniscient and before Whom all things are as clear as day, did not need a map, did not directions in order to find the tomb. Yet, he invited in the help of others:

"Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." (John 11:34, RSV)

Let this serve as a symbol for all the countless ways in which doctors and nurses, friends and neighbors, you and I can lend a hand to fight for life on this

earth. In the end, life belongs to our God. Yet our God is happy to have our help in the good fight for life.

Again, Jesus did not need others to roll away the stone for him. He who rolled out the plains and crafted the mountains and sprinkled the sky with stars and planets needed no help in rolling away a stone from a tomb. Yet, again, he invited the help of others:

³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." (John 11:39, RSV)

Let this serve as a symbol for the humble, unskilled help that we can contribute to saving others. Not all of us are doctors or researchers or therapists. But many of us can help take away the stone. We can put our shoulders into the task. We can contribute our muscles if nothing else. If we are not talented enough to cook for our congregation's Meals on Wheels program, still we might be able to walk around the neighborhood and deliver the meals. We can walk up the darkened stairways of our apartment buildings following this week's storm, knock on the door of an elderly neighbor, and bring some milk and bread to that one. Only Jesus can summon Lazarus back to life. But we can lend a hand to rolling away the stone.

FRIEND OF SINNERS

And finally, let me lift up this great passage, among the shortest verses in the Bible:

³⁵Jesus wept. (John 11:35, RSV)

This is the verse that is radiant with hope for you and for me. Jesus wept. He was deeply troubled by the death of Lazarus. He wept in grief at the death of his friend. He knew full well that he would raise him back to life, yet he wept that this world, for four days, was without the man and that his sisters were filled with sorrow for those four days.

It is natural that if he had the power to do so, he would raise up Lazarus to life again. For Lazarus was his friend. But here is the glorious thing: you are his friend too:

¹³Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. ¹⁵Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; (John 15:13-15, KJV)

The dear hymn puts the matter right:

What a friend we have in Jesus! (LBW 439)

Yes, and not only are you are his friend, but so is that one who is dear to you but who now rests in the ground. Mother, father, husband, wife, friend, child! They are each one encompassed in that most magnificent of rumors spread abroad about Jesus – the blessed rumor about this friendship with sinners:

¹⁹The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. (Matthew 11:19, KJV)

Jesus is a kind-hearted man who has life within him and is glad to share that life with others:

²⁵Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. ²⁶For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; ²⁷And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. ²⁸Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, ²⁹And shall come forth; (John 5:25-29, KJV)

There is much to grieve about in this world. Especially we do well to grieve for our sins. But Christian grief always has the right to be tinged with some hope, indeed with gratitude. For we belong to the One who means to “wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more,” even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

