

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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John 11: 32-44  
All Saints Sunday

### “Counting Our Blessings-God’s Faithfulness”

Last week I began a short sermon series titled “Counting Your Blessings.” But we’re not counting our blessings like we did when we were children by rattling off all of the stuff we’re thankful for. Instead, we’re going deeper than that, and looking at some core theological concepts for which we need to count our blessings.

Last week, we gave thanks to God and counted as a blessing God’s grace. Today, we’re counting as a blessing God’s faithfulness. It’s a good topic for All Saints’ Sunday, because All Saints’ Sunday is a time to thank God for the life and faith of the people who have nurtured and taught us, inspired us and helped us; and molded us into the people we are today, because these people are our saints.

When asked what makes a saint, the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor replied: “Extravagance. Excessive love, flagrant mercy, exuberant charity, immoderate faith, intemperate hope, inordinate love.” (Weavings)

Saints are the people who loved us and encouraged us and whose love continues to be a living force in our lives. And so today, I encourage you to think about, to remember, and to give thanks to God for the saints in your lives.

And if that means tears are shed, that’s OK. After all, Jesus cried for Lazarus; “Jesus wept”, the gospel tells us; it’s the shortest verse in the Bible, and yet one of the most descriptive. Because it says something about God. One, that God weeps, but two that God gives us life and is always faithful. Because we learn in the story of Lazarus that death isn’t the final word. Life is the final word; indeed, the hope and love we find in God, because God is faithful, is the final word.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus were dear friends of Jesus. Jesus often stayed at their home when he was in Bethany and, as his own life comes to an end, Jesus will stay with them every night until he dies. The Gospel of John tells us Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus, which is the only time John names specific people Jesus loved. The four of them were friends; good friends.

Lazarus becomes ill, gravely ill. So Mary and Martha send word to Jesus to come, not only because they want Jesus to know what his friend is ill, but also because they believe Jesus can cure him. But when Jesus gets word of Lazarus’ illness, he does something odd-he stays where he is for two whole days. One would think that Jesus would drop everything he’s doing and run to Lazarus’ bedside, but he doesn’t. He waits.

When he decides its time to go to Bethany, the disciples aren't happy about it, because it's dangerous there. Bethany is only two miles outside Jerusalem, and Jesus is already receiving death threats. But Jesus sets out for Bethany despite all of that and, sure enough, when he gets there he learns that Lazarus has been dead for four days. Friends of the family have already gathered at their home and, as people are wont to do in these situations, they've brought food and are trying to say comforting things to the grieving sisters. And they, too, are crying and grieving the loss of Lazarus.

Now, when Martha sees Jesus coming down the road, she is not happy. In fact, she's angry. "Greatly disturbed" is the nice way the Bible puts it. She tells Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." In other words, you could have prevented this! If you hadn't spent those two extra days doing Lord knows what and had come when I asked you to come, Lazarus wouldn't be dead in that tomb.

It's an honest and valid complaint, and we can learn something from it. We can learn that faith is not without feelings of anger in times of crisis, and that it's OK to be angry with God. (Francis Taylor Gench, "Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John")

But Martha's pain is also intertwined with her faith, and her faith in God tells her that there may still be hope, because God is faithful. So Martha says to Jesus, "I know God will give you whatever you ask of him." She's hoping against all hope that Jesus will perform a miracle. And she's seen him perform many miracles, so she knows he can do it.

"Your brother will rise again," Jesus tells her.

They are comforting words, but not exactly the words Martha was hoping for; her bubble is burst and begins to deflate right then and there.

"I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day," she says. She may as well have said, "Of course. What was I thinking expecting you to bring life from something that is dead?" Conventional Jewish belief taught her that the dead would stay dead until the world came to end.

But Jesus gently corrects Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this?

This question brings us to the very heart of John's gospel. Because what Jesus offers in John's gospel is a full and rich life now. For John, eternal life is much more than what awaits us on the other side of the tomb. Eternal life is what Jesus offers us now-and it's rich and full of joy. It's what Jesus offers us now, and we don't need to wait until we die to experience it and live it.

Of course, this isn't how we normally think of eternal life. We equate eternal life with heaven. But in John it is much more than that; much deeper than that. It's about life now-full, rich, complete, deep, free and whole. Life now.

Jesus wants us to live our lives fully and completely now, not wait until we reach the other side to start living. "I have come," Jesus said, "that my life, my joy, may live in you. Do you believe this?"

It's the very heart of John's gospel. Do we believe this?

Martha said yes. But what if she had said, "No. No, I don't believe." Would it have changed the outcome for Lazarus? Would Jesus have changed his mind and gone on back to what he'd been doing during those two days he dallied?

No, I don't think so. I think Jesus would have still raised Lazarus from the dead. What would have changed was Martha's view of life. She would have gone from believing that the life, hope, and comfort we find in God's care is boundless, to believing that hope has boundaries, that death is the final word.

She would have lived in the state of "yes, but" or "if only". And those are states that so many people know all too well. Yes, I believe, but . . . There's a qualifier . . . Yes, but . . .

We say we believe, but we can't quite give ourselves and our lives over to the transformation and new life that God brings. Something holds us back. We say believe, but we don't always live our lives like we believe. We hold back . . . Fear, anxiety, an unwillingness to change, or let go get in our way. Yes I believe, but . . . things won't change; or get better; dead men don't come back to life . . .

Or we live in the state of if only. Remember what Mary and Martha both said? "Lord, if only you had been here," our brother would have died. Lord, if only. If only. If only we'd made that phone call, sent that letter, not sent that e-mail, taken that job; said the right words; if only we were richer or thinner or taller or smaller . . . How many hours a week, a month, a year, do we spend on the "if only" game? Our necks are craned to the past, fantasizing about what could have been, dreaming of would-be destinies -- as if we could change the past. We can't.

Jesus doesn't want us to live in the state of "yes, but" or "if only". Jesus offers us life now, a rich and full life now. "I have come," Jesus said, "that my life, my joy, may live in you. Do you believe this?"

Jesus doesn't want us to live in those states, wrapped up in grave clothes like Lazarus. Jesus unbound Lazarus from the strips of cloth that wrapped him up in a dark existence; and Jesus unbinds us, too, from the strips of cloth that bind us; such as

- Self doubt
- Social isolation
- Addictions and fears

- Hopeless and loss
- Grief
- Anxiety
- Hatred and resentment
- And lack of faith that puts us in a tomb of despair

But God doesn't want us to live in the state of "yes, but" and "if only", smothered by grave clothes that bind us.

As people of faith, as resurrection people, we believe that life has power over death. We believe that because God is faithful, life always triumphs over death; hope trumps despair; love conquers hate, joy conquers resentment. Because God is faithful, God is still speaking to us today, calling us out from our tombs of despair, denial, and death to new life, right now, right here.

A long time ago, in a place called Bethany, Jesus stood outside the tomb and called out, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. And Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." And the dead man came out . . .

"I have come," Jesus said, "that you-everyone-may have life and have it fully. I have come that my life, my joy, may live in you."

So the message for this All Saint's Sunday is live. Live today and every day. Don't out things off. Tell the people you love that you love them.

Live, as the great theologian Karl Barth said, like children on Christmas morning, surrounded by gifts we did nothing to deserve, our hearts brimming with gratitude, our lives full of joy, and counting as a blessing God's faithfulness which makes all things possible.

Amen.