

Sermons at Christ Church

Be One Body In Christ, belonging To Each Other.

All Saints

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

There is a story of a ninety (90) year old lady who in a chat with a chaplain explained to him how she takes care of herself. She said, for better digestion, I drink beer, in the case of appetite loss I drink white wine, in the case of low blood pressure I drink red wine, in the case of high blood pressure I drink scotch, and when I have a cold I drink schnapps. The perplexed chaplain then asked her, so when do you drink water? She responded that I have never been that sick.

It appears that this old lady had devised some solutions to some of the issues that she regularly deals. But our reality is different-what we deal with on an almost daily basis proves to us that we don't have solutions to every problem, and one of the nagging problems we deal with is death. Can we ever stop death or determine when it may happen or escape from its long reach? Can a loved one stay with us a little longer? As a former hospice Chaplain, I have been in any and all kinds of situations where families would prefer that death stay as far away from their loved one as possible. Our reality is that ever since humans became aware of death-that at some point, we will cease to live, we have tried our darn best to overcome it.

The dialogue between Jesus and Mary in today's gospel story is so revealing. You can sense and even touch the frustration of Mary as she meets Jesus "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary believed in Jesus and especially what Jesus could do. She believed that should Jesus have treated their earlier call to him with some sense of urgency, Lazarus would still be alive with them, he would have been alive with them a little longer. But alas, Jesus didn't respond early enough and so Lazarus is gone.

And as we all do when a loved one passes, we cry. We cry because we will no longer see that person again. We cry because of the empty space that the person has left in our lives. We cry because of unfinished business. But we cry because of the emptiness we feel.

I remember receiving a call to visit someone who was near death. They needed a priest to be there to say a prayer for her. When I arrived, the woman had passed away, but the husband was uncontrollable. You could hear him say in his tears, *it shouldn't have been this way. It shouldn't have been this way.*

Later on, he explained to me that they made a pact, that since he was the oldest among the two, he will be the first to die. And so as he cried, he remembered the pact, and felt that the woman hadn't kept her part of the bargain. But could she? Was there any way that he could have stopped death from laying its icy hands on her? I bet that if he could go anywhere to buy any medicine to cure his wife, just so she may live a little longer, he would've done it, because you and I do it all the time.

I lost my father when I was 14 years old and ten days away from enrolling in boarding school. One sunny afternoon I was sitting in front of the chapel, hungry. I realized that I didn't have any food nor did I have any money to buy any food. The only way that I could get some food to eat was to wait till I can go to the dining hall. But I was hungry. I was really hungry. But as I sat in front of the chapel hungry, it just dawned on me, in a very real a powerful way that had my father been alive, I wouldn't be hungry. That reminds me of Mary's frustration, Lord if you have been here, my brother would not have died. I was hungry and watching other people eat because like Lazarus, my father was dead.

That thought alone unleashed all the tears that had been suppressed in me since the day I learned of my father's passing. I simply cried.

I cried because I missed my dad. I cried because a part of me yearned for that father who was my provider. I cried because a part of me longed for the time when I had no worry in the world because my father provided everything I needed. I cried like Mary, Martha, their friends and even Jesus because death had disrupted my reality, my life, and there was no way to fix it. We cry because of our helplessness.

That is the impact that death has on us, and like Mary, Martha and their friends-we cry, we mourn, we bury our loved ones and we move on because we feel that sense of helplessness against this very enemy. We have questions that have no answers.

Like Mary, Martha and all those who were with Jesus at the cave, we argue that there is already a stench in the tomb, so don't roll away the stone, we don't want to deal with the stench. There's nothing we can do because we've moved on.

What Mary, Martha and all those people didn't know was that Jesus had an answer to their question and our question, Jesus had the capacity to bring new life out of the stench of the tomb, what they didn't know was that Jesus could call life out of the dead places of our lives, what they didn't realize was that Jesus can give your life back to you again.

What they didn't realize was that with Jesus we don't lose life, we don't die, we live, we live because he is not only the Lord of life but that he came that we might have life and live abundantly.

The abundant life that Jesus promises is a new life made possible even in death-when all our hopes are gone, when our dreams feel buried, when we are saturated by the stench and the darkness of the tomb, Jesus appears and calls us out of that tomb. Jesus assures us, I am the way, the truth and the life, I am. And those who believe, even though they die, they will live. Do you believe it? Yes, Lord, I believe. Said Mary.

We celebrate all the saints today not because of any special gift or talent that they had. We celebrate them because they did not only believe, but they gave off themselves in a way that affirmed what they believed. These are people who looked at themselves, not as having a solution to all the problems, these are people who like Lazarus were dead and lying bound in tombs. These people are like you and me. The difference is that they heard Jesus call from the tomb, and so they walked out, and when they did, they also heard Jesus say unbind and let him go. And when those white strips of cloth came off, they took off. When they realized their new freedom, they took off. Within their new freedom, the saints see a new world-one where death isn't the end of the human story-but life is. A world where our fundamental question about death has been answered by the Lord of life. They could see a future beyond death, of a new heaven and a new earth-where God was among his people wiping their every tear.

Saints see a new day-one where no day is ever lost. Saints believe that if I move a single grain of sand to help my fellow man; if I bring one stray into the fold of God, or send a ray of hope to one lonely soul like a sunbeam in a prison cell; or offer water to quench the anguish thirst of one on the way of life, or ease a heartbreak of a wearied soul...that day is never lost.

Saints see a new person-one who believes that saints are like a group of trees, each bearing different fruit, but watered from the same source. That the practices of one saint may differ from those of another, but it is the same spirit that works in all of them. And that practice is about honoring God in daily life and work.

Saints see new possibilities, one where there is no better instruction for you and me and the world than the instructions which comes from God. For it is by believing in and trusting in God that the glory of God is made manifest in all of our lives.

As we bring our Stewardship Campaign to a close, I want you to know that you are also a saint because you can give off yourself in a way that affirms your faith in God and his son Jesus Christ. And if you believe, you can, like Lazarus, walk into the newness of life that Jesus promises. **Amen.**