

All Saints' Sunday
John 11:32-44

Heavenly Birthdays*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Some of you may know that today is a significant birthday for me. I have Facebook to thank for that. And as much as I dreamed of being a priest growing up, I never would have imagined that I'd be here with you, at this pulpit, on this day. What a privilege and blessing it is to celebrate this milestone with you!

Today we celebrate All Saints' Day, one of the seven principal feasts of the liturgical year. It ranks up there with Easter, Christmas, and Pentecost. On this feast day, we honor all the saints of the Church. But it's also a birthday celebration of sorts. (And to be clear, I am not talking about myself here.)

Historically, the early church honored the memory of a saint on his or her birthday, which was called the *dies natalis* in Latin. But the *dies natalis* was not the saint's earthly birthday. Rather, it was the date of the saint's heavenly birthday – when he or she died and was born into eternal life. As such, All Saints' Day can be thought of as a catch-all birthday party for all the saints.

But, beyond celebrating the heavenly birthdays of our saints, why is All Saints' Day so important? What is the point of this feast day? Well, traditionally speaking, All Saints' Day commemorates the church triumphant. That is, on this day we remember all those martyrs and heroes of the faith who triumphed over suffering and death and who are now with God. And so, the deeper meaning of All Saints' Day is this: Death is never the last word.

This is why the story of Lazarus is so appropriate as today's gospel. Jesus is away when his beloved friend Lazarus dies. Lazarus' sister Mary is distraught; she says to Jesus: "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus, too, is distraught. He weeps upon learning of Lazarus' death, even to the point where those around him said, "See how he loved him." And it is out of this love that Jesus raises Lazarus back to life. Death is never the last word.

This theme – that death is never the last word – appears in the other readings for today. In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, God promises that death will be destroyed, and that death will be swallowed up forever. In fact, God will wipe away all the tears from our faces.

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And, in our epistle reading from Revelation, we are again promised that “death will be no more” in the new Jerusalem. There will be no mourning or crying, and “pain will be no more.” Again, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Death is never the last word.

One of the Episcopal Church’s saints, Oscar Romero, has been in the news lately. Romero was the Roman Catholic archbishop of San Salvador in the 1970s. He was an outspoken critic of his country’s government, which was carrying out many political assassinations. In March of 1980, Romero delivered a particularly provocative sermon, in which he instructed the military not to obey any orders that violated God’s law against murder. The very next day, Romero himself was killed by a death-squad gunman, right in the middle of saying mass.

In 2006, Romero was honored by the Episcopal Church with a feast day on March 24th, the date of his heavenly birthday. A life-sized statue of Romero also appears above the west entrance of Westminster Abbey in London, as one of the ten prominent 20th century martyrs. Three weeks ago, the Roman Catholic Church finally caught up with us Anglicans, when it officially declared Romero to be one of its own saints. Death is never the last word.

Over the last few weeks, I’ve been reading and reflecting upon Romero’s sermons and writings. One of the things that really moved me was his own theology of sainthood. A few years before he was martyred, Romero made a beautiful connection between sainthood and baptism. For him, sainthood was simply living out one’s baptismal promises. He wrote: “Christians who live out their baptism become saints and heroes. No one is worth more among the citizens of a country than baptized citizens who are faithful to their baptism.”

In other words, you don’t have to be a martyr or a superhero of the faith in order to become a saint. Rather, you become a saint by taking your baptismal promises seriously and by living into them fully. That’s why I love our gospel hymn for today. I always smile whenever I hear these lines about everyday saints:

You can meet them in school,
or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in trains,
or in shops, or at tea;
for the saints of God
are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.

As the hymn says, sainthood is not for the select few. That would be letting the rest of us off the hook too easily. Rather, we are all called to be saints. Let me say that again: We are all called to be saints by virtue of our baptism.

But there’s more. There are saints all around us. We just have to look and see. Every year, CNN publishes a list of what they call “everyday people doing extraordinary things to change the world.” I was really moved when I read about this year’s list of everyday heroes. Their stories really gave me hope about the goodness of humanity, during a time when it’s so easy to fall into despair.

One of these people is a man named Luke Mickelson. A former youth ministry worker, Mickelson founded a charity called Sleep in Heavenly Peace, which builds and donates beds to families who can't afford beds for their children. Mickelson started building beds because he was shocked at how many children in his own town were sleeping on floors. Over the past few years, his organization has donated some 1,500 beds across the country.

Then there's Maria Rose Belding. As a college freshman, Belding created a free online platform called MEANS to match food pantries with businesses who have extra food that they would otherwise throw out. Belding had volunteered at her church's food pantry as a high school student and was troubled by how much expired food was being thrown out every day. Belding's online platform has redistributed nearly two million pounds of food since 2015.

And then there's Ellen Stackable. Stackable is an English teacher who volunteers her time by teaching poetry and creative writing classes to incarcerated women. Her creative writing program is called Poetic Justice, and it allows her students in prison to open up and share their painful life stories with one other. Stackable describes her classes a "sacred" and "safe" space – in places that would otherwise never feel safe.

I could go on, but you get the idea. There are saints all around us. We just have to look and see.

To be a saint, as Oscar Romero said, is to "live out our baptism[s]." By living out our baptismal promises – including striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being – we boldly proclaim that death is never the last word. Through our baptisms, we, like Lazarus, die to our old selves and are reborn in Christ. And through our baptisms, we receive God's grace, which helps us to resurrect the Lazaruses that are all around us.

And so, All Saints' Day is not just a birthday celebration for the martyrs and the superheroes of the faith. It is also a birthday celebration for *all* of us – a celebration of our baptismal birthdays in which we are reborn in Christ.

We rejoice today in the good news that death is never the last word. Happy heavenly birthday to all the saints. Happy baptismal birthday to all of us. Happy All Saints' Sunday!