



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

Who Do You Want To Be When You . . . Die? Luke 6:20-31; Ephesians 1:11-23

Three long-time friends were having coffee together one morning as they had for years. As they covered the usual range of topics, the subject of death and funerals came up. They talked about memorial services they had attended and began to discuss what they would like to have said at their own funeral. One of them, a physician, said, "I would like for my minister to say, 'John was a great doctor who cared about his patients and made the lives of many people healthier and happier.'"

Another of the friends said, "I think I would like for my minister to say that I was a good family man who took care of his parents, raised his children well, and adored his wife."

The two men looked at their friend who had not spoken and asked, "Well, Jim, what would you like for the minister to say at your funeral?" Jim sat still for a moment and then had a look of revelation on his face. "At my funeral," he said, "I want the minister to look down at me as I lie in the casket and say, 'Look! He's moving!'"

There have been a few occasions when we have celebrated the life of one of our "saints" that someone has come up to me and said, "When I die, I want you to have the same service for me: the same music, the same scripture and prayers, even they same eulogy. Just change the name!" A funeral eulogy is not quite that adaptable, but we all do want to have nice things said about us when our life here is over.

There were two brothers who lived in a small town in South Carolina. Everyone knew them because they were notorious. They were lazy and shiftless. They would cheat and steal without batting an eye. They would lie to your face and stab you in the back. No one liked the two brothers and no one trusted them.

It happened that one of the brothers died. The surviving sibling wanted a proper burial, so he went to see the Baptist minister and asked him to officiate at his brother's funeral. "As you know," said the Pastor, "I did not like

your brother any more than anyone else in town. In fact, I can't think of a single thing I did like about him, but everyone deserves a funeral. I will do it." "There is one provision," the brother said. "I want people to think well of my brother in his death so, if you will say that my brother was a saint, I will make a \$5,000 contribution to your church." The minister thought for a minute and then said, "Your brother was anything but a saint and everyone knows it. I also have my reputation to think about." "Just remember my offer," said the brother and he left.

A rather large crowd gathered for the funeral, mainly out of curiosity over what the minister would say about this deplorable man. The Pastor stepped into the pulpit, offered a prayer beseeching God's mercy on the dead man's soul, and then began his eulogy.

"Everyone of you knew Tom. You knew how he would lie and cheat and steal. You knew how he spread false rumors and made fun of other people. He was vulgar and vile, lazy and lecherous. All in all, he was a rather despicable person. But," he quickly added, "next to his brother, he was a saint!"

We often ask young people what they want to be when they grow up and expect them to tell us they want to be a fireman or nurse, a doctor or teacher, own a business or sit in the Oval Office. Those answers really are about what we will do when we grow up. A few weeks ago, I was at a conference at Campbell University when one of the speakers posed what I thought was one of the best questions I have ever heard. He asked, "Who do you want to be when you die?"¹

Who do you want to be when you die? That is a good question to ask ourselves. Since we never know when death might come for us, it is really a question about who we are right now. There is an old adage that says, "Live in such a way that when you die, even the funeral director is sad." Who do you want to be when you die?

I think in everything Jesus did and said, he was asking this very question. He had a knack for getting right to the point whenever he taught. In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, which is better known as the Sermon on the Plain, because he and the crowd were on level ground rather

¹Walter Brueggemann, Question and Answer Session, *Elevating Preaching Conference*, Campbell University Divinity School, October 3, 2016.

than a mountain side, Jesus cut quickly to the chase. He offered blessing to the people who were listening, a sense of vitality and well-being that was attached to who they were. He warned them that true blessing would not be found in tangible things like money, food, or other possessions. Neither could it be gained from a sense of being carefree or even from the praises and plaudits of other people. If these things are your investment in life, he warned them, then you have already had your payoff here!

The good news was reserved for people who had not necessarily enjoyed the good things that this life provides to some of us. He told the folks who were "sure-enough poor" that they would inherit the kingdom of God! The hungry would be filled, the bereaved would experience joy, and the people who were on the front side of human cruelty--those who were hated, reviled, and defamed would receive their reward in heaven--clear proof that God has a soft spot for politicians!

Jesus' point was that if our desire for life is nothing more than enjoying the comforts and commodities life has to offer now, then that may be all we get. If we spend our lives chasing things, then those things may be all we have. However, if we spend our lives living as Jesus taught, being the people God created us to be, we will be blessed far beyond our expectations. Who do you want to be when you die?

Jesus said, if you want to be somebody who embodies the goodness and grace of God then:

- ❖ love other people, even your enemies;
- ❖ do good to other people, even to the ones who hate you and call you names;
- ❖ bless the people who curse you;
- ❖ pray for the people who abuse you;
- ❖ when someone takes a swing at you, don't retaliate;
- ❖ when someone takes what you have, find out what they need and provide it for them;
- ❖ when people beg for help, give it to them.

In short, he said, do to other people as you would have them do to you.

I know the kind of things I would like for people to say about me when I die, but it is far more important what they say about me as I live day to day. And, more important than what people say about me, is what I actually do. Do I treat other people with respect and dignity? Do I show kindness to other people? Am I generous when there is a need? Am I patient when there is distress? Am I empathetic when there is a problem? Am I loving when there is nothing but animosity in the room? Am I forgiving when I am the object of someone else's frustration? Am I kindhearted when all I encounter is hardness of heart? Am I willing to treat other people like I want them to treat me? Do I love myself enough so that I can tell the difference? Can I be trusted? Will I keep my word? Will I honor the person God created you to be?

The life of faith is the life lived out of love. It is kind and generous, wise and thoughtful, patient and understanding. It is not something we can wait to do later on for we never know when life will turn on a dime. Today we have honored people who lived as saints among us, not always in "saintly" ways, but as faithful followers of Christ. They could not "get ready" for death; they had to be ready for life. Who do you want to be when you die? Who are you today? A life faithfully following Christ will help us answer both questions. So start thinking and asking and living. Amen.

All Saints Homily

My maternal grandmother died when I was eight years old, about three weeks shy of my ninth birthday. She died on the day before Thanksgiving, a Wednesday that would have been a half day at school but became an early holiday for me and my brothers and cousins.

I remember lying in my bed that morning, hearing my mother on the phone telling someone the sad news, so I knew what had happened. When she came to wake me up and tell me, I did not want to hear those words so I blurted out that I already knew and took to my pillow again. The next day or so was an odd time of being in my grandparents' house with all the family there except my grandmother. There was the funeral and the long ride to the cemetery and the feast of foods which took the place of our Thanksgiving meal that year. My Great-Uncle, my grandmother's only brother, saved the day for us children by helping us to understand that life goes on even when one life stops here. There are lots of memories, but one that always pops in my mind.

The night before the funeral, our family was at the funeral home for the visitation. At some point, my father asked if I wanted to see my grandmother. It was odd to see her lying in a casket, but she did look peaceful. I knew enough to know that she was gone from our lives, and that was enough to break my heart.

Later, just before we left to go home, my father asked if I wanted to see her one more time. At eight years old I did not know how to handle conflicting feelings. I said no because it was so sad to see her that way, but deep down I really did want to see her again. My father respected my wishes and I did not see her again. I have regretted it ever since.

I regret not taking another look at my grandmother, not because I did not complete my grieving over my her death or because of some curiosity I had. I regret not seeing her again because I really wanted to see her. She had been such a familiar and beloved part of my life as were all of my grandparents. I had missed seeing her the months she was sick and in the hospital. I regret not looking one more time because, the truth is, I would still love to see her again.

When a loved one dies, we often wish we had one more glimpse, a quick peek, a fleeting look at their face or form to be certain that we will not forget them. We wish we had one more look to share a memory or a favorite story or special news. We wish we could see them one more time.

The reality is that we do see the ones we love in many ways and many places. We see them in other people: children, grandchildren, siblings, friends. We see them in familiar places and things and in cherished memories that do not fade.

Today we take another glimpse at our friends who died this past year. As their names are spoken and flames ignited to represent their spirit, images and memories dance in front of us like the flame of a candle, sometimes dim, now brighter, now flickering, now steady.

We wish we could see these friends and loved ones one more time . . . and we can. We see them in the people and places and activities and concerns that were part of who they were. We see them in this church and in the interests that kept them busy for many years. We see them in the faith they lived and which will always remain vibrant.

As we call these names and light these candles, look one more time at the people who were so special to us and will remain so forever.

We gratitude to God and abiding love, we remember:

Bettina Godwin Batts
Carrie Fussell
Harry Howell
Jerry Jolley
Carolyn Strange
Betty Watts

Dorothy Daughtridge
Betty Godwin
Richard Jenkins
Grace Lewis
Tim Valentine

We remember family members and friends who have died in the past year.

We remember those persons who died in years past and are still dear to us.

We remember those persons who died this year due to natural disasters or human violence.

God grant them all eternal rest and light everlasting. Amen.

November 6, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who is far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, who was and is and is to come, in our times of worship and in all the circumstances of our lives, we stand in awe of the generosity of your gifts to us, and with grateful hearts, we offer to you our thanks and praise. We give you thanks that you have called out faithful witnesses and have continued to reveal your Word of truth for generations. And we give you thanks that you call us and speak to us in this place and for our own time. Make of us faithful hearers and doers of your Word. Disturb our ways of living and thinking until they are one with your ways. Stretch and challenge us through your call to a costly discipleship and cradle us in the strong arms of your mercy. Speak to us in the majesty of your creation and whisper to us in a still, small voice, so that you will not be hidden from us, but that we might recognize your work in our world and in our lives. We praise you, O God, for your grace that continues to pursue us and your love that will not let us go.

Living God, who is our light and hope, on this All Saints Day, we thank you for the gift of eternal life and for all those who, having served you well, now rest from their labors. We thank you for all the saints remembered and forgotten, for those dear souls most precious to us, and especially for those we have remembered today. We praise you for their life and love and rejoice that they now see you face to face and live in the fullness of your mercy. May their witness inspire us to a deeper and more active faith, worthy of the example they have set for us. By the lives they lived and the lessons they taught, let us recognize what it means to be called your children.

We seek your guidance and peace in the week ahead, Merciful God, as we make decisions and elect leaders who will help to shape our nation, state, and community. Grant us the discernment to choose wisely and to seek unity whatever the outcomes. Give us the grace to build bridges of understanding and to love even those with whom we disagree. Help us to work for the good of all, knowing that regardless of age or gender or race, no matter the language spoken or the faith practiced or the party supported, we all carry your image within us and are, therefore, sisters and brothers in the human family. As we prepare to gather around your table, remind us that we are your saints not by our own inclination or strength but through the redemptive power of Jesus Christ our Savior, in whose name we offer this and all our prayers. Amen.

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