

Grace, mercy and peace, from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

All Saints Sunday: an important day in the life of the church.

I would like to begin my sermon with a prayer. It's a prayer taken from a two-year cycle entitled "For All the Saints." It's a prayer book that's filled with daily readings from the Old Testament, Epistles and the Gospel with a preceding prayer and an ending prayer and some thoughts from one of the church theologians over the years. I happened to notice that Pastor Dan has this in his office.

I was looking at it as I had read the lessons of the day, earlier in the week, and I noticed the Prayer of the Day. I noticed the Prayer of the Day said exactly what I wanted to convey to you this morning. So I would like to say that prayer with you this morning. And let us pray:

Lead us, O God into the secret place of your presence, that having seen you in Christ, we may love you. And having loved you, may fashion after your mind this place where you have set our feet, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Our Gospel lesson – in fact, all the 44 verses including our Gospel lesson in this 11th chapter of John – is about Lazarus, or so it seems. It's also about Mary and Martha. But you see, Lazarus' name itself was mentioned six times in six verses and in 11 other of these 44 verses, we see that he is the subject – but not once do we hear words from him. The Gospel revolves around Lazarus yet it's not about him.

As the chapter unfolds, it unfolds with more and more meaning. And we're brought into this unfolding. We're brought into this unfolding: two loving sisters, Mary and Martha. We know somewhat about them from other sections in the Gospels. But here we see almost a reverse, because Martha is the one who first previously comes to Jesus to talk about concern.

They both are faithful witnesses to a belief in this Jesus, but what's unfolding in their life is overtaking them. Understandable, as their brother is near death, dying. Deeply concerned, yet, ladies of faith. This happens to be what they call the "seventh sign of miracles," of which there were six preceding ones in the

Gospel of John. But this is the most climactic, that reveals the glory and the power of God.

Before venturing too much further into our Gospel text today, I'd like to take a step back and talk a little bit about All Saints. In the seventh century, the Pantheon in Rome was rededicated and the Pope at that time wanted to rededicate it in honor of the martyrs of the Christian faith that had existed in the centuries before. For you see the Pantheon was a place of pagan worship, and around this period of time of the end of October, the first of November, pagans worshiped. Wiccans today still give recognition of this time. But what the Pope wanted to do at the beginning of the seventh century was to remember all the martyrs who had given their lives in order to give witness to this Jesus of Nazareth.

One hundred years later, the pope at that time decided that he would put a little different twist on this All Saints Day. And he referenced it to *all of those who had died in the previous year*. Most of us in our custom today follows that, but to remember that to almost two thirds of the Christian witness, All Saints Day has a very significant place and meaning.

Martin Luther, not only a scholar, but a pretty shrewd marketing person, too, realized how people gather together on All Saints Day – fairly much the custom in the medieval ages, true, in 1517 – because the day before All Saints Day, Luther nailed the 95 theses, *knowing* that the crowds would be assembling and reading what was on the church door, which became part of this movement that began to refocus who God was, as a God of love, as a God of grace.

Let's re-enter our Gospel text at this time. It's a very familiar story. Perhaps someone in our family circle comes to be ill. Loss being on the horizon. Anxieties of what life would be without. So true with the sisters, Martha and Mary. The event of loss touches us all. For Martha and Mary, and for Lazarus, who almost seems to be on the sidelines. Illness was real.

But there are also losses of other kinds too. Losses of physical vibrancy and health. Maybe loss of direction. What's going to be my motivation for this time of life? Loss of anticipation for the future. And wondering that what may be held in

that, realizing I'm not so much in control. Loss of hope, how that can occur in many different ways, in different forms as in loss of relationship that we hold dear, or that was filled with possibilities. Or loss of engagement to life and the spirit of vibrancy.

And now Mary comes to Jesus and fell at his feet, very much with that potential loss within her heart. "If only you had been here," she said, "If only you had been here; it's too late. It's too late. If you had been here before, there would have been enough time and what you have to offer is too little," and the events of illness continue to unfold. Part of life occurred in Lazarus too, as he died. Her brother, the sister said, is gone.

On the sides were the Pharisees – a separate story but an important one: Watching if Jesus would take a misstep, say the wrong words, that they could then pick up on their own agenda against him.

Jesus' response as we read in our text today is that he was deeply troubled and Jesus saw the tears in the sisters eyes. And Jesus wept.

(One verse. Just prior to being confirmed, our pastor gave his class the opportunity to pick a Scripture that they could quote in front of the congregation. Along with a couple of other of my buddies, we chose this verse, "Jesus wept." Go figure! He was smart enough not to go with our little ruse.)

But yet within this one verse, that brings some humor as I reflected on it today, it speaks to who our God is. It speaks to the one who weeps, when you and I weep. Of all the religious faiths that we have surrounding us, the faith nailed in Jesus Christ is a God who is truly human, who truly, truly weeps. He weeps when we shed our tears and we are able to expose our wounds. He embraces us. He embraces us with his tears.

Truly human. That's our God. Reminded as we are on this All Saints Day. But with our God, God's Son, there is much, much more. For he comes to the tomb on which Lazarus' body was placed.

And as we read these verses, surely, an awareness occurs that within a short period of time Jesus' own body would be placed in a tomb, the results of the crucifixion of which those others, the Pharisees and others, had their agenda.

And a stone would be rolled in front of that tomb. And “Lazarus,” he proclaimed, “come out, come out,” not to let death prevent you from experiencing the love of God, from experiencing the presence of God, from knowing the presence of God, be it death or any other kind of loss.

And we read that they may believe, like you and I may believe to come out of that, and the bandages of loss that can prevent it. To Martha, Jesus had proclaimed, in a few verses before our Gospel texts for today, he proclaimed these words, “I am the resurrection and the life.” From the depth of pain and loss around Lazarus came the height of new life around Lazarus: the heart of God, the heart of God, a receiver of the one who cares, bringing new life.

And today we especially remember those who have modeled “I am the resurrection” in that hope for us, in our deepest losses.

Martin Luther King, senior, was the pastor of Ebenezer church in Atlanta, Georgia for 44 years. He was a model for many as he dealt with the injustices and the segregation that occurred in and around. And in those 44 years, he witnessed to something very meaningful and powerful. His wife was shot at an organ, thinking that it was him, in order to make a statement about what he was trying to minister. He lost one son at a death at a swimming event that still remains a mystery. And then we know about his other son, who was killed with an assassins’ bullet in Memphis. Martin Luther King, senior, a saint. On his tombstone outside of Ebenezer church, downtown Atlanta, he wanted to have on his tombstone printed these words: “Still in business, just gone upstairs.”

The witness of saints continues.

In closing, I would like to share a personal story about one of the saints in my life. It’s my cousin Steve, three years younger than me, who about two decades ago, his life was changed. He was a tremendous high school athlete. He was a three-black-belt karate. He developed to be very intelligent, developed three IT companies, as his diagnosis of a rapidly declining heart was taking place. Married a beautiful wife, had children. On his deathbed, he was given a heart—and in that heart transplant, his own physical life was renewed! He continued his activity in his church and modeling something within his family about going on:

loving his wife, who at that time, had experienced a stroke and became paraplegic because of the stress in the family, and he cared for her.

Visiting him a short time later, Steve let me know that the donors, whose son's heart was pumping inside of him, asked if they could come and visit him.

Wonderful occasion surely. And when they came, Steve said, they brought a case with them. A wooden case, and they asked for permission to open it. And inside the case was a stethoscope. And they asked these words: "Can we listen to our son's heart, alive in you?"

"Son's heart alive in you." All Saints Sunday. And our Heavenly Father, as we reap the benefits of those saints prior to us, is now asking us something very much the same.

"This heart of my Son, alive in you, and me." That's our challenge and that's our opportunity, to live this Lazarus-type story today. To live out the model of those who brought to us the heart of God. For the Jesus Christ, the one who weeps, the one who dies, and the one who rises again, who nourishes us through bread and wine – may the son of our Heavenly Father's heart be alive in you and me.

In His grace, Amen.