

Sermon - November 7, 2021

Christine Anders

A story is told about a little boy who visited a cathedral with his grandfather. On each side of the sanctuary were beautiful stained glass windows. Curious, the little boy asked "who are those people in the windows?" The grandfather replied "Oh, they are saints." Wanting to know more the little boy asked "what are saints?" The grandfather wasn't sure how to answer and before he could respond the little boy said "I know, saints are people the light shines through."

When we think of saints, we often think of people like St. Augustine, St. Paul, Mother Theresa and others the Roman Catholic Church have canonized. But I think the little boy was right. Saints are people the light shines through.

As you are aware by now, today is All Saints Day, a day we remember those who have gone before us, whose earthly light has gone out for us and yet whose light still shines bright in the presence of God. Today we remember and are grateful for the many ways they touched and influenced our lives and the world. Today we proclaim that they are now a part of the church triumphant, that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us and encourages us. But on this All Saint Day I hope we also take the opportunity to think about our status as living saints, those whose lives reflect the love of God and are still striving to give witness to that love through our words and deeds. We, God's living saints are called to embody the kingdom through all we do.

Today's gospel lesson tells the story of the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha are friends of Jesus. Lazarus becomes sick and Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus asking him to come. When he arrives, Lazarus has already

been dead for four days. Mary and Martha complain that if Jesus had come sooner, Lazarus would not have died. Jesus asks "where have you laid him?" They go to the tomb and Jesus instructs those present to take away the stone to which Martha replies, "Lord there is already a stench because he has been dead four days." The King James version simply says "by this time he stinketh." They roll the stone away, Jesus looks upward and thanks God for hearing him and in a loud voice commands Lazarus to come out. Then it happens, verse 44 says the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "unbind him and let him go." Here is the thing. Sometimes before a resurrection can occur, things must be foul and messy. This is true of personal resurrections and institutional resurrections. You see, resurrections don't always happen when all is sterile and clean and smelling like our favorite perfume. Sometimes people and institutions must experience some decay before they can be resurrected.

The raising of Lazarus is a fantastic story but I want us to focus on the last verse of the text, "unbind him and let him go." I think that for us, the living saints of God these words are more important than "Lazarus, come out." In these instructions of Jesus we are reminded that it is the community that needs to assist in the resurrection. There are people who are yearning to live a resurrection life but they are still tangled up in burial clothes. They still have the sheets and coverings of death holding them back. They are still bound up in old relationships, old arguments, old addictions, old sin. Jesus offers new life "Lazarus, come out" but it is the living saints who must "Unbind him and let him go." It is up to us, to help release those in bondage, to complete the resurrection. When we refuse to let someone go, when we refuse to forgive, when we refuse to help them be released from whatever is binding them, we are keeping them dead to the life God wants for them. The community has the power to keep others bound or to free them to new life.

Institutions including churches sometimes need a resurrection. Right now things may seem messy in our church and our denomination but we must have the courage to seek the vision God has for us. We must lose the things that are keeping us bound to the past or we will not experience the resurrection God has in store for us.

Even governments sometimes need a resurrection. I was recently on a zoom meeting that included an ecumenical prayer time. The leaders of many faith traditions acknowledged the toxic environment our country is experiencing. To put it like the King James version of the Bible, our environment stinketh! And yet I have to believe that there is hope for resurrection. We must loosen the death clothes that are keeping us from experiencing the life God wants for all. We must stand up and speak out when we hear disparaging or threatening talk, we must speak truth to power, we must work for justice, and we must love our neighbor and our enemy. Like the saints in those cathedral windows, we must let God's light shine through us.

God offered Lazarus a new life and God offers the same to us and the world but it is up to us to make it a reality. The work of resurrection is never easy, it's often foul and messy and it sometimes stinketh, but as we work to bring it about, let us remember and give thanks for the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, who are surrounding us and offering encouragement, cheering us on as we the living saints seek to help bring about the resurrection of this world our God loves. Amen.