

Prayer of the Day: We praise you, dear God, for all the saints in whom we've known your love. You call us here today to remember them, to be inspired by them as we try to live faithfully in our way. Startle us again, O God, with how you love us in Christ ... so much that you bring life out of death; so that what is bound up inside us is set free in your Spirit to serve every day in all we do, in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Unbinding Life

Isaiah 25:6-10a; John 11:32-44

Seth E. Weeldreyer

November 1, 2009 – All Saints Day

Every year leaves shroud our lawns, streets and roofs with glorious beauty that belies the dead of winter soon to come. And we share this fascination with shrouding ourselves (or vicariously our children) with some character of life we wish we had(?). Or maybe, if truth be told, of which we are afraid or at least confused and uncertain. And then the candy flows so abundantly to enliven our children, we may think we need to bind them like Lazarus just to get them to bed. And the givers are so abundant this sugar high of life could last for weeks! [By the next morning they still might run off to Sunday School even faster than usual.]

The way we celebrate Halloween it's all about living abundantly the face of death. Some still criticize Halloween festivities as some literal glorification of ghouls and devils. And doesn't it tend to miss the point? Not unlike those who also criticize Harry Potter and so miss all the good messages in it about life and love that is stronger than the power of death. When I've read those books and watched the movies, I've thought J.K. Rowling must have really loved Halloween!

All Hallows Eve began in our Christian tradition connected with the rhythms of the earth. Just maybe because it seemed to be when we humans naturally remembered our loved ones who fell like the leaves this past year. And even more it became a reminder, a foreshadowing as we head into the long, depths of winter that spring, Easter will come again.

At least that seems to be the reason John tells the story of Lazarus – to remember or accentuate life in Jesus' love. And in the way of telling God's promises in Jesus Christ it foreshadows what's to come with his own death. When I read this story about Lazarus, I'm struck by how it's not really about Lazarus at all. And if you're like I've been before, and we get stuck on more literal questions about how it happened, or take from it some conundrum about resuscitating corpses in our time and place, then we tend to miss John's point about fullness of life in God's love for us now.

You see, this story is really about Mary and Martha – their grief and sadness. Their struggle to simply understand, or maybe their desire to click "undo", rewind the video, go back to the way life was before. Do you know how they feel? As if they found Lazarus' or we'd say Gayle's bowling ball again, Charles' HAM radio, Pam's laminated news articles. As if Lady the dog came waddling in at the end of Jeanne's leash; or Wanda's favorite chair and place at the table seems all too empty. As if kicking around our homes and minds and heart, we like Mary and Martha see signs of a person like Lazarus we have loved, the life we've known and lost.

Inasmuch as Lazarus' body is bound up so are Mary and Martha's hearts and minds.

And this year I find it hard not to think of life for some that may feel entombed behind some big stone of disappointment, anger or frustration. I remember your laments: 35 years of hard work evaporated in these economic troubles, injustices of society that strike so personally, relationships broken. Life is bound up, endings constrain us in many ways even beyond physical deaths.

We were just talking in the Lounge about our fears in life as we face death. And we agreed that one of our greatest fears is that we would be alone, forgotten. We want a meaningful life connected with other people. And that is one of the greatest we share at funerals and times of death themselves when we are gathered around our loved ones. And even beyond what we humans share, the Bible reminds us time and again that God never forgets anyone. Even people who seem less than celebrated and most disconnected ... in the breadth of God's grace no one is ever forgotten!

On All Saints Day we remember loved ones we've lost. And in the end, it's about our lives and how we carry on in that love we've known through all the endings and new beginnings, great and small, that we face every day. Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian minister and author. He's written some of his best loved and most uplifting work based on losses of dear people he has known. I love the way he speaks of memory not just as thinking about what's past. Rather as a way of looking into the future where everything that has been, continues to change and grow with us giving life anew. "Dead and gone though [our beloved] may be," he writes, "as we come to understand them in new ways ... through them we come to understand ourselves—in new ways too."

And in a kind of simple way of saying it, that's the whole purpose of John's gospel. The reason he writes is so we may understand Jesus better. And out of that relationship, we understand others and ourselves more fully in God's grace, as well. That's the power of resurrection.

The simple truth the Bible tries to tell us time and again is that God's power of life and love people knew so strongly and intimately in so many ways, most of all in Jesus of Nazareth, this love is still alive among us today. And this power of love that rolled away the stone in front of Christ's tomb, keeps us connected with our loved ones who are now marked with a stone. The power of compassion, sacrificial love and deep goodness in Christ keeps us full of hope and resources to live abundantly even when it seems the life we knew is gone.

You see, when we read this story of Lazarus, John doesn't want us to get hung up on literal details in a factual scientific way, either about what happened or what to expect. He wants us to feel how we are like Mary and Martha or Lazarus. He wants us to know deeply and intimately the presence of God who comes to weep beside us as disturbed as we are ... the power of God's love that unbinds our life. We open our hearts and minds to the Way Jesus loved and the truth he lived. His presence and power settles deep within us. We live in big decisions and small contributions as his disciple surrogates in our world. Propelled on by all the love of our saints who've gone before, we do want to be one too.

“Who knows what ‘the communion of saints’ means,” Buechner concludes. More than just being haunted as if by Halloween ghosts, surely it means “that through them something of the power and richness of life itself not only touched us once long ago, but continues to touch us” ... and will unto eternity. Whatever life is like after this with all the saints gone before; John at least tries to stress that eternal life with Christ begins now – the glorious beauty that belies the shroud of death. It can already be seen in fleeting glimpses and shared in lingering moments that foreshadow the fullness of goodness to come.

After all the candy last night, amid all our joys and uncertainties, our goodness and our grief, all the hopes and disappointments in this world, dear friends, come to this table where God fills us with the power of Christ’s love. Come to believe, to give our hearts to God’s promise in Jesus Christ that the shroud of death cast over all peoples will be lifted. Give our lives to God’s purposes in Jesus Christ that all people may share Isaiah’s abundance of food and resources for life ... here in this sanctuary high and lifted up, in our community and everywhere as on that mountain of the Lord Isaiah envisioned long ago.

Lazarus, come out! That is, you who have eaten Gayle’s garlic toast and Charles’ famous beans; you who remember Alice’s fine chocolate shop or have shared some of Wanda’s favorite apple pie; you who can see Jeanne busy about the kitchen keeping it all under control; you who been nourished by Pam’s smile and notes goodness in everywhere but the kitchen that remind us all of God’s goodness deep inside us, as well!

Come, and unbind the loneliness, the fear, and the frustration in the power of God’s comforting presence. Unbind the hurts and failures in the power of God’s forgiveness. Unbind forces of society and consequences beyond our control with the power of God’s justice and sacrificial service. Unbind ourselves from any uncertainties or cynicism we may have about what lies beyond the veil of death ... in this life and the next. Dear friends, live in the fullness of God’s grace and our simple gratitude. By God’s gift of peace restored, keep Love’s tie unbroken, until we all join those saints seated at the heavenly board!

Thanks be to God. Amen.