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AMDG

The Feast of All Saints, November 5, 2017

“We are knit together in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of God’s Son Christ our Lord” - As today’s collect reminds us, that is the great reality that we celebrate with great pomp and solemnity today. We are one. Nothing separates us from God or from one another, not even death. On the ancient calendar November 1 is the Feast of All Saints, and November 2 the Feast of All Souls. We celebrate them together today, and these two great feasts that honor the mystery of our transformation in Christ occur at the time of year when all around us living things are beginning to go dormant, or die and decay. It is no coincidence that the church developed great festivals that complemented or replaced pagan festivals celebrating death. But, it is not death that we celebrate on the Feasts of All Souls and All Saints, it is eternal life, it is the Kingdom of God present in and among us. Celebrations of the early church were often centered around the dead. Archaeological evidence shows that in the second and third centuries from Northern Africa to Italy to Palestine, the first openly Christian worship spaces were built around tombs and cemeteries. The faithful shared meals around the burial places of their spiritual heroes and loved ones. They built elaborate tables over the graves so they could share a spiritual meal with those who had passed on. Some of these tombs even contained opening through which the wine and bread could be shared. It seems strange and maybe even morbid to us, but our ancient spiritual forbearers understood the communion of saints very literally. They knew, that despite all physical appearances to the contrary, they were not separated from their loved ones in death. And they celebrated that reality in very tangible ways. And it was not just their loved ones that they felt connection to; it was those heroes of faith - the saints and martyrs. With the persecution of Christians happening around them, the early followers of Christ had to believe that the martyrs were in their Glory, unified with the Creator, and still very accessible to those here on earth. The idea of calling on saints for prayerful intercession and the practice of dedicating

a church under the patronage of saints and martyrs comes from this early understanding of the communion of saints.

Unfortunately, the idea that those we loved and admired were still accessible to us led to the idea that the saints were members of some heavenly guild of lobbyists, competing for attention from God to grant special favors, like some corrupt medieval court. This perversion of the true nature of the communion of saints, is based on the idea that God is a bribable sovereign, whose judgments and actions could be swayed on the basis of intense prayer or acts of piety. We took a beautiful and holy understanding of the connectedness of all things and twisted it to match our flawed understanding of the Kingdom of God - nearly opposite of the truth Jesus came to proclaim. Last week, in celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation we honored those saints and martyrs who risked their lives and reputations to rid the church of flawed teachings such as this.

But just because a belief has been misinterpreted and abused doesn't mean we should give up on the truth behind that belief. And surely the most valuable truth of the Christian faith is that through Jesus we are eternally united with one another. And this eternal unity comes from a deep and abiding love, which is perfectly expressed in acceptance, justice, peace, mercy, and joy. In today's Gospel Jesus beautifully describes how blessed we are when we live the life into which God called us. We are unified with all Creation and with the Creator in love, and we experience this unifying love most purely in serving one another and connecting deeply and humbly with the world. In yesterday's service for Jim we celebrated this reality with great joy.

God's love for us moves us to love in return, not only God but also each another, so that every Christian is a mirror in which the light of Christ is reflected to every other Christian. Jesus' love for Lazarus must have been that deep, that he would weep at his death. And that bond of Christian love with one another and all Creation in Christ and through Christ, is eternal everlasting, never broken by death.

In affirming our belief in the communion of saints we're not saying the saints, martyrs, and dear departed somehow have more influence with God than we do, but that when we are troubled we want all those we love to stand beside us to reflect the love of God.

Neither are we seeing that the saints and our dear departed were perfect and that we want to match their perfection. Just like us they lived lives of imperfection. They walked that fine line between beauty and brokenness that is our human existence. We are each one of us a saint, each one a sinner. These heroes of faith, the saints, were beset by fears just like us. But in accepting the transformative love of God, they were able to set aside their fears and take the risks necessary to live as God called them to live - feeding the poor, healing the sick, challenging the powerful. It is their willingness to live the God life boldly and without fear, that we can access through prayer and reflection, so we can answer God's call in our own lives.

We are surrounded by the love of God and of our fellow Christians, living and dead. And the people we celebrate today, women and men we call saints as well as our loved ones who have passed on, manifested that love and that is why we remember them. Their examples call to us. And it is right for us to call to them, asking them to stand with us in prayer, just as we would ask a loved one here on earth to pray for us. Let us follow the examples of those great heroes of faith the saints, who lived life with full confidence in God's guidance and protection. Let us not be afraid to call on all who love us, present and past, for their prayers that they might stand with us as we strive to fully be part of the mystical body of Christ.