

Sermon: A Communion of Saints**Scripture: Romans 8:31-39****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 30, 2016**

Sometimes we narrow our understanding of church to an hour on Sunday morning when hymns are sung, scripture is read, and a sermon preached. We ask one another – Are you going to church this Sunday? Did you go to church today? What church do you go to? And we forget that we are participating in something that is so much deeper and more majestic and hallowed than one place and one hour can contain. To be a part of *the church* is to be in a communion, a communion of saints, not because we are saintly in here, but because by being here we place ourselves under the sanctification of Jesus Christ and by His grace we are made into a communion of saints.

We, the church, this communion of saints, is populated by those across this globe but also by those across time. This communion includes those who have died and today we call to mind those who join us in this communion but who are no longer with us physically. It is they who remind us that nothing can separate us from the love of God, nothing, not even death itself, for we the church know and proclaim that they live on in the heavenly dimension. Even if we individually wonder and doubt at times the reality of heaven, we can trust upon the teaching of the church that there is another dimension of existence within which life is held eternally, thanks to our gracious God. And even if our grief at the loss of those we love feels - as the poet Rainer Rilke described it - as “this massive darkness that makes me small,” even so, we can rest in the

church's profession that God cares for us deeply in our smallness and that death does not have dominion over us or those we love.

This is what we remember, celebrate and cling to on this day of days in 2016 as we come to the turning of summer into winter, of October to November, when for centuries the church - and pagans long before - have remembered the faithful who have died, have lifted their names aloud in the gathered assembly and declared that these souls are alive and well. It's the three days of "Allhallowtide" which includes the evening before All Saints, All Hallows Eve or Halloween, All Saints Day on November 1st and All Souls Day or the Day of the Dead on November 2nd. It makes sense with all that is happening in the natural world that it would be mirrored in the spiritual world as well. As the leaves fall, the green growth of summer dies off, and the earth prepares herself for the coming death of winter, we remember our dead... and we call to mind our own deaths for none of us are getting out of this alive and we too will want to be remembered in this communion when we are gone.

So we will soon after the anthem take a moment to lift up and present the names of the saints and souls who live in our hearts and in the heart of God and who surround us as so great a cloud of witness despite their physical absence. We want to do this presentation, the presente as it is known in Spanish, when it comes, with gusto and the energy of faith rather than with despondency and sorrow, not to deny the grief but together to proclaim their presence as in no way dead to us or to God, for we know that nothing can separate us from God, nothing.

But first let us mind the gap, the very real sense of separation that also exists between us and those who have died. The German

theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned and killed by the Nazi's, wrote a beautiful letter to a friend describing the pain of separation he felt locked in prison on Christmas Eve and far away from his family and friends. But the letter he wrote stands as a beautiful account of the grief at being separated from our loved ones whether they be alive or have died:

I should like to say something to help you in the time of separation that lies ahead. There is no need to say how hard any such separation is for us; but as I have now been separated from all the people that I am devoted to, I should like to pass on to you something of what I have learnt..." First: nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute, we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God does not fill it, but on the contrary, keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our communion with each other, even at the cost of pain." Secondly: the dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude changes the pangs of memory into tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne, not as a thorn in the flesh, but as a precious gift.... We must take care not to wallow in our memories, or hand ourselves over to them, just as we do not gaze all the time at a valuable present, but only at special times, and apart from these times keep it simply as a hidden treasure that is ours for certain. In this way the past gives us lasting joy and strength. And thirdly.... I have learnt here especially that this fact can always be mastered - that difficulties are magnified out of all proportion simply by fear and anxiety. From the moment we wake until we fall asleep we must commend other people wholly and unreservedly to God, and leave them in God's hands, and transform our anxiety for them into prayers on their behalf."

Giving thanks and lifting up those we love to God doesn't mean that we will hurt less and nor that we are expecting God to make it alright

because in this life love necessarily involves a sacrifice and our sorrow, our grief, at the absence of a loved one, is a part of that sacrificial offering to God for the sake of the other, despite the cost to ourselves. But giving thanks and offering them up is a way of honoring and treasuring them and acknowledging that their presence and love in our lives was not due to our earning or deserving but to God's grace. And it is God's grace that keeps us bound to one another in this precious communion.... in the sacred embrace of this communion with one another.

Mary's embrace of Christ at his death is a beautiful image for us of the divine feminine, the God of Love, holding us through life and through death until God's holding becomes our beholding and our becoming in the full life of God. "Mother Mary," as the beautiful song goes that the choir will sing, "come and carry us in your embrace, let us see your gentle face..."

Closing Benediction:

Surrounded as you are by so great a cloud of witnesses, take courage as you go your way doing all the good you can, wherever you can, accompanying it with prayer and follow it with thanksgiving. And may the blessing of the most Gracious God, whom the saints have known and trusted as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you now and ever more.