

Remembering With Love and Gratitude©

All Saints Day

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32-44

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This first Sunday in November has become a very special time for us here at Holly Presbyterian Church. November 1st is the designated day that the Church universal has called All Saints Day. It is a time when we remember and honor the faithful Christians who have gone before us in the years passed.

We often think of saints as those who are known for their extreme faithfulness and sacrifice, many of whom were martyred because of their beliefs.

But, while most of us have not had to lose our lives defending the faith, Paul calls all Christians saints. His letters to the early churches often began with the greeting “To the saints in ...” whatever church he is writing to. And the people are still living when he calls them that.

We believe that the saints are all who are living or who have passed into our heavenly home. In the Apostles’ Creed we say, “we believe in the communion of the saints and the life everlasting.”

So, on every first Sunday of November – on, or just after All Saints Day, which is November 1st – we remember the saints from this community of faith who either have passed away this last year or whose memorial gifts we have used for the church.

I think about Dan Nash and how last spring I went to Traverse City to visit him in the hospital. I asked what was weighing on his mind. After sitting quietly for a moment he answered in a low voice – “I hope people don’t forget me.”

I would imagine that is the hope of all of us. While we are here on earth, we strive to make a difference. We bring our own personalities, our humor, our emotions, our desires, our God-given gifts, our love to those around us – those whom God has put in our lives, I think, for a reason.

We hope we do some good, help others, make a difference in the lives of our children and grandchildren – and maybe even the lives of others as we travel on this journey called life.

When we come to the end we hope something will remain that will cause people to think of us, remember us, to smile or even to shed a tear because they miss us.

You’ve probably heard the poem titled *The Dash* by Linda Ellis:

I read of a man who stood to speak
At the funeral of a friend

He referred to the dates on her tombstone
From the beginning to the end

He noted that first came her date of her birth
And spoke the following date with tears,

But he said what mattered most of all
Was the dash between those years

For that dash represents all the time
That she spent alive on earth.

And now only those who loved her
Know what that little line is worth.

For it matters not how much we own;
The cars, the house, the cash,

What matters is how we live and love
And how we spend our dash.

So think about this long and hard.
Are there things you'd like to change?

For you never know how much time is left,
That can still be rearranged.

If we could just slow down enough
To consider what's true and real

And always try to understand
The way other people feel.

And be less quick to anger,
And show appreciation more

And love the people in our lives
Like we've never loved before.

If we treat each other with respect,
And more often wear a smile

Remembering that this special dash
Might only last a little while.

So, when your eulogy is being read
With your life's actions to rehash

Would you be proud of the things they say
About how you spent your dash?

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It's the dash – how we spend the time between our birth and our passing that gives us the legacy we will have after we are gone. Some people do remarkable things in their lives and some people live quietly and simply. But either way, we are making a difference to those around us – whether they are many, or few.

This service today is part of how we honor that hope of Dan, and Barbara, of Cheryl and Ken and Dora; of William and Virginia and Jim; of all our beloved – that they not be forgotten. Most of these today are just being remembered with love as they passed on in this last year. Some are being remembered, who passed away earlier but who's memorial gifts we have used for the church in the past year.

Some of these I knew pretty well because they were here where I had the opportunity to spend time with them a pastor. Some were not and I can't claim knowing them – but you might be able to speak about them. In a few moments, as I call each name, I will ask that a family member or in the absence of family, a friend, come light a candle for that person. As they do I invite you to silently reflect on a memory you have of that saint. At the end I will say a prayer of thanksgiving for their lives.

Although it is such a difficult thing to lose a loved one, we have so much to be thankful for, as people of faith. We are surrounded by love and support as we grieve. We have our brothers and sisters in our faith communities, many who have experienced grief themselves. We have the scriptures that have so many promises of life after this life.

Jesus says in John 14 that there is plenty of room in the Father's house and that he is going to prepare a place for us and will come back and take us to be there with him.

He assures the thief who professes his belief in who Jesus is, who is being crucified next to Jesus, that on that very day he would be in paradise with Jesus.

We have the story from John that we read today of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from death, even after Lazarus had been dead in the tomb for four days. We read of Jesus' own grief as he wept for his friends who were crying, and of his power in calling out the name, commanding him to come out. Lazarus came out of the tomb still bound up in the death cloths but Jesus ordered them to “unbind him and let him go.”

I believe that is what happens with us when we die. Jesus calls us from death to life, commanding that we are unbound from the death cloths that have tried to wrap us up to no avail. In Christ, we are set free!

One of my favorite scriptures is from the letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the Hebrews in chapter 12, verses 1-3:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

What a vision that is! Paul says we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses – all the saints who have gone before us. I envision clouds that are like bleachers with all the faithful loved ones sitting there, watching us and cheering us on as we make our journey of faith through this life; as we persevere through the hardships and the joys, as we do our best to stay faithful to the end. They are our cheerleaders.

We believe in the communion of the saints who surround us and are with us and will welcome us home someday. We stand in faith as we await the Lord's coming, proclaiming with Isaiah:

⁸ *(The Lord) will swallow up death for ever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.*
⁹ *It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*

Thanks be to God for the saints that have gone before us, influencing us and passing on that faith, who surround and continue to encourage and help us on our journey.

Thanks be to God the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.