

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

THE GIFT OF THE SAINTS

Ruel Howe had a friend, who was dying with terminal cancer. Howe went to visit his friend one day, and he didn't know what to say. He was amazed to find the friend in control of himself. The friend said to Ruel Howe, "When I began to work through this experience, I made an amazing discovery. And it is this: 'For every exit, there is an entrance.' All the way through my life I have had to give up things in order to get things. I've had exits in order to get entrances. I had to give up something in order to go to school. I had to give up something in order to take a job. I had to give up a single life in order to get married. All the way through my life, I've died a hundred deaths. I have had to die for something in order to get something new and better. For every exit, there is an entrance. And death is one more exit to that which is more."

If you stop and think about it, all of us have experienced a kind of death already, an exit from one life and an entrance into another life. What we call "birth" is really a death of sorts. After spending nine months in our mother's womb, life in that dark and confined space came to an end. And yet, for every exit, there is an entrance! We were born; we entered this new earthly life that is so much more glorious than life in the womb. And, as Christians we believe that, when our physical bodies die, we will be raised with Christ into the heavenly kingdom, which is so much more wondrous than this life (as good as it is) – so wondrous, we can't even begin to fathom. Also, as Ruel Howe noted, in between those two deaths and new births, there are many more exits that give way to entrances, that lead us onward to something new and better.

The story in John's Gospel is about an exit and an entrance. By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, his friend Lazarus had died and had been buried in the tomb for four days. Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit – so much so that he too began to weep. Here, we see Jesus' full humanity revealed as he weeps with those who weep. Here, in Jesus, we see the God, who loves, and cares, and suffers especially when God's children suffer.

Jesus not only wept, even more, he acted. In a commanding voice, he said, "Take away the stone!" Despite protests regarding the stench of the dead body, Jesus prayed to the Father and thanked God for hearing him and for acting so that the crowd might believe. Then, in a loud voice, Jesus demanded, "Lazarus, come out!" And that dead man had no other option but to obey the Lord of life. Lazarus exited from the jaws of dark death and entered into the bright sunlight and the grateful embrace of his sisters and friends.

If you hear in this story a prelude to Easter, you are exactly correct. In fact, earlier in the narrative, Jesus said to Martha, the sister of Lazarus, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." The raising of Lazarus is an echo of Easter. Jesus is Lord of life, and whenever he comes among the dead, the dead begin to rise.

On this All Saints' Day, we not only remember the saints (i.e., believers in Jesus Christ), who have lived and died, we also rejoice that, through the risen Christ, they have been raised to new and eternal life within the heavenly realm. We mourn their passing but we take comfort in knowing that every exit leads to a grander entrance, and we find

great hope in knowing that they are alive and well within the eternal and heavenly home. Our loved ones and many more make up that “great cloud of witnesses,” who cheer us on as we run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

On this day, we give thanks to God for the gift of the saints, who are now numbered within the Church Triumphant in heaven. We are grateful for the many and various ways their lives have blessed and shaped our own lives, through what they said and did. Like us, they were not perfect but they sought to be faithful. Like us, they were simultaneously sinner and saint. Like us, they too received the grace of God and, in turn, they passed God’s gifts on to us and to many others.

This morning, at the First Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia, as that congregation gathers for worship, they too will give the Roll Call of the Saints, and the name of our son, Andrew Clair Stevens, will be sounded. It has been nine long months since he died – an eternity for Andrew and for all of us, who love him. In the midst of our sorrow, by the grace of God, I also recall some of the gifts this particular saint passed on to his father. Andrew taught me to cherish each day and those around us, and to live life on purpose. Once I was telling Andrew about a problem I was having with someone, and he said to me, “Dad, it’s time you let it go,” and he was exactly right - and I did. Andrew taught me how to live and die courageously in his three and an half year battle with cancer; I can only hope and pray that I will follow his lead when it’s my time to die and be raised.

I could go on and on, and so could you. We give thanks to God for all of the gifts that our beloved saints have imparted to us and left with us. Surely, we are better persons because of their love, their influence on our lives, and their faithful witness to us. Since death is a given reality of our human existence, I am grateful that for every exit there is another entrance to be gained, and that is particularly true for our loved ones as well as ourselves, who have died to sin in our baptisms and have been raised to newness of life both now and forever in Jesus Christ.

On this All Saints’ Day, we do well to remember that it is also a Communion Sunday. We don’t just remember the saints, who have gone on before us; we especially remember their Lord (and ours), who took the broken bread and the poured-out juice and said, “Do this, in remembrance of me. And, in our remembering, we also rejoice for, when we eat this sacred meal, we sup with all of those who have gone before us, as well as those who commune around the world and those who will come after us. We are spiritually united through the Lord Jesus Christ, who makes us one across time and space and beyond. The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is a “foretaste of the feast to come.” Here, at the table of our Lord and Savior, past, present and future meet and we are spiritually connected with all of the saints as we commune together with our Lord.

How can we thank God enough for the gift of the saints in your life and in mine? What can we do to express to God our gratitude for “the communion of the saints?” Perhaps this simple story will give us a clue: A father and his little son were visiting a beautiful cathedral. They walked up and down the aisles, their heads upturned, amazed at all of the beautiful stained glass windows. The father asked his son, “Do you know who the saints are?” “Sure,” said the boy, “the saints are the people where the sun shines through.” That’s not a bad definition of a saint. A saint is someone for whom the sun shines through – those through whom the Son – (Jesus Christ) shines.

By the grace of God, we too are called “saints!” May the light of Christ shine through us, and may the gifts of God be passed on from us to bless and help many others – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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