

**Sermon, All Saints, Year B, November 4, 2018, Jane A. Beebe**

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. (John 11:33-35)

In the early eighties, after having begun my first job in Grinnell, Iowa, I discovered the Episcopal Church. (And it happened because a friend invited me to attend. Just saying...) The 1982 Book of Common Prayer was my introduction to the Episcopal liturgical tradition, including the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. The Apostles' Creed forms the framework for the Baptismal Covenant that we reaffirm as a worshipping community whenever there is a Baptism—and we will celebrate a Baptism in the Christ Memorial family on the 18<sup>th</sup>! One of the things that we say we believe is that there is a "Communion of saints." (BCP, p. 304) I have always been intrigued by this. What does it mean? Appearing as it does in the Baptismal Covenant, how does this belief shape our common life as disciples of Jesus?

About ten years ago I was honored to help a friend and colleague plan a memorial service for her mother. I will never forget the conversation I had with her before the service. In telling me about her mother, one of the first things my friend said about her mother was, "She was just a *wonderful* person." I was soon to hear many of the ways this woman demonstrated an indomitable spirit and a deeply loving, even healing, presence. The conclusion I came to then is: this woman is a saint! Not a saint in the way we often think: a life written large. I think of a saint as

someone who lives her life according to the best light she knows—and sometimes succeeds.

John Wesley defined sanctification as, “...Pure love reigning in the heart and life.” Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and essayist, said, “In [God’s] holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a pocket handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.” (*Beyond Words, “Saint”*) Buechner also said, “A saint is a life-giver... A saint is a human being with the same hang-ups and dark secrets and abysses as the rest of us. I hadn’t known that before. But if a saint touches your life, you come alive in a new way...” (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 177) So, saints are *human beings*; saints are *alive*. Saints cause us to come alive. Saints show us that the Resurrection is real. Saints are in relationship with the rest of humanity: they are in communion with us.

I believe the saints are nearest us when we are grieving or anticipating a loss. Those who mourn are all of us gathered here today, because even young children are no strangers to death and loss. Grief is a journey that I heard described by one priest I know as a spiral. We think we are around one bend and it comes back around to the same place. Memories can be two-edged sometimes—but all the more reason to make space for them, to allow them to be. A friend wisely said that while we often find ourselves living our lives on the surface, an event such as the death of a loved one brings us to another level of time and reality. A saint is one

who is able to transmute the pain of grief into compassion: "...To weep with those who weep..." (Romans 12:15) Mary Oliver wrote a brief poem entitled "The Uses of Sorrow." It appears in a collection of her poetry entitled *Thirst* and was written after the death of a loved one.

Someone I loved once gave me  
a box full of darkness

It took me years to understand  
that this, too, was a gift.

What do saints have to do with our Gospel reading today? The passage is part of a larger story of Jesus' special relationship with three siblings who reside in Bethany: Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. The first thing we hear is Mary's poignant cry as she kneels at his feet, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And she doesn't simply kneel at his feet: the sense of the Greek is that she *fell* at his feet. A lot is expressed in Mary's words. Her grief is still in the raw stage. She seems to be reproaching Jesus, her Teacher and friend, for his absence at a critical time. This is certainly not the outcome Martha and Mary hoped for. At the same time, Mary seems to affirm her belief in Jesus' power to restore life. Perhaps she does not dare hope, yet her hope is there. It is not only Mary who is weeping but all who have assembled to be with the family. Jesus responds with

great empathy: we are told he is disturbed in the depths of his spirit. He asks to be shown where Lazarus is laid. But before he can make his way to the tomb he is overcome. Jesus weeps.

I think it is significant that Jesus does not rush off to make everything better. He takes time to show his own grief and compassion. He is with a family dear to him. By taking the time to weep, he honors the relationships he has with each of them. In a few weeks we will shift seasons. Our focus will be on the God who is Emanuel: God with us. Yes, Jesus goes to the tomb, asks for the stone to be removed, and calls for an already decaying human being, Lazarus, to come out. Jesus reminds Martha that her belief will allow her to see the glory of God. He has told Martha that he *is* the resurrection and the life. And yet, is it not Jesus' willingness to be with her and with Mary, to show his care for them, that is also life-giving?

Restoring Lazarus back to life is miraculous. Yet being with the family, not as someone apart, but as someone who loves them is merciful. "Mercy" is one of my favorite words. The OED defines mercy as showing compassion for someone who is powerless. Martha and Mary feel powerless over death. Jesus shows them that resurrection is real. His empathy for their grief heals their hearts. Perhaps that gives them the strength to roll away the stone to the tomb and unbind their brother. We do not hear what Lazarus does with his life after he is released from the tomb.

After all, Lazarus is still a human being with human limitations. I imagine that something happened inside Lazarus when he heard Jesus' voice. In that moment Lazarus must have said, "Yes." The pattern of his life is hereafter completely altered.

How Lazarus may have lived was modeled for me by a dear friend of my father's he knew from his church. She was a pastoral visitor and often brought him communion, first in his apartment, then in assisted living, and later in the skilled nursing center. Her name is Martha. I later learned that she was in the early stages of multiple sclerosis. The diagnosis necessitated her early retirement from her job as an archivist and curator in the field of North Carolina history. She had recently lost her husband and her brother within months of each other. It was apparent that she derived much meaning in bringing the sacraments and a prayerful presence to others. Ironically, her early retirement made this ministry possible. Her neighborhood also happened to be near the retirement community as well as the main rehabilitation facility for the local hospital.

Martha ministered to me as well. One of the best things she did for me and my father was taking care of the installation of a new phone when he had to move to the skilled nursing center. She had been the executor of her father's estate and was able to pass on a lot of wisdom about that process to me. Martha could have viewed her life as being over. She had suffered much loss in a short space of time.

Eventually she would become disabled. Instead, with great courage, she chose a resurrected life. At the end of my father's life I wrote a series of short poems to help me remember and mark some of the things that happened. I wrote one for her.

**Martha**

Martha, you are well-named. You know  
the resurrection and the life when you see it.  
You walked this journey before me -  
several times in recent years.  
You advise me to buy a printer that can scan  
and fax.  
You love my father too.  
You bring him the sacraments. You buy me coffee.  
You are faithful .