

Sunday, October 31, 2021 – “Unbound by the Saints ”
– Bible Study & Reflection on John 11:32-44

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from John 11:32-44 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

This Sunday, we celebrate both Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday and All Saints’ Sunday. The sixteenth century Reformation was a rediscovery of the core truth of the Church down through the ages: We are saved by faith in God alone through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our faith sets us free to become agents of change and renewal as we continue the work of Jesus to liberate people from whatever tombs that they are entrapped in, even the tombs of the past. All Saints’ is the Sunday that we remember our loved ones and friends who are now in the presence of God’s eternal love, light, and care. We remember how they influenced our lives by the life they led and their words of wisdom. They may be physically dead, but they live on in our memories and through their past influence on us and how we exercise that influence in our daily lives. Through us, their testimony lives on.

In a sense, every Sunday we gather for worship, we listen to the testimony of dead people – the prophet Isaiah, John on Patmos, and the writer of the Gospel of John. In this Sunday’s scripture, we will hear the voices of people who have been dead for the past 2,000 years. Indeed, Isaiah speaks to us from 3,000 years ago.

All of this Sunday’s lectionary lessons (Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44) deal with the testimony of people who have walked the path of faith before us.

In our Gospel text, Jesus raises from the dead his friend, Lazarus. “Unbind him and let him go,” Jesus commands when he gets to Lazarus’ tomb. Jesus goes to the place of death, where corpses are taken, corpses all bound up for burial. We are justified in taking this story of Lazarus as a parable of what happens in our church every Sunday. We come into the presence of the dead – people like Isaiah, John, Lazarus – all people who are entombed in the dead past. And then, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, these long dead figures walk among us, speak to us, point us the way to faith in the Living God. That’s why we usually pray a prayer (Prayer for Illumination) before the sermon/reflection is shared, asking the Holy Spirit to enliven the words of these faithful long dead witnesses so that they may speak to us today. Our God is still speaking.

We live in a culture that has been called “ahistorical.” “History is bunk,” said Henry Ford. Our memories don’t go much further than what we had for lunch yesterday. Margaret Mead once criticized American culture as being populated by “neophiles,” lovers of the new.

All Saints’ Sunday is therefore a grand opportunity for us to be reminded of the gift of the saints, the peculiar wonder of a community of faith, the Church, which moves forward by looking back, that lives through listening to the dead. We do not have to make up our faith as we go along in life. There are trustworthy guides who have walked before us – people like Isaiah, John, and the others who form the “communion of the saints.” They will show us the way, if we have the courage to listen.

I close with the lyrics of the third verse of William Walsham How’s majestic hymn, “For All the Saints.”

“O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle; they in glory shine;
yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.
Alleluia! Alleluia!”

Grace & Peace,

Pastor Greg Rupright