

Sermon
All Saints' Day
November 3rd, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: WISDOM OF SOLOMON 3:1-9; PSALM 24; REVELATION 21:1-6A; JOHN 11:32-44

When I was in the Master of Divinity program at St. Paul, one of the course assignments was to plan our own funeral. We were not to plan for a far-off future funeral; the date of the funeral we were to imagine for ourselves was the date the assignment was due – a mere two weeks away. At that stage, my children were very young, and I was in the midst of the discernment process for ordination. I chose readings and music, and I wrote my own funeral sermon. It was quite an experience...

The Gospel passage I chose at that time was this one we've just heard on this All Saints' Day. It was Jesus's words "Unbind him and let him go" that made me choose it. As I contemplated my own death, as I imagined leaving family and friends, as I considered moving from this world to the next, I experienced a profound sense of unbinding. That unbinding was a process of peeling back layers of life lived, to find, to feel, a bond at the very center of my being. A bond of love – my love for God, and God's love for me.

John's Gospel brings us seven signs that reveal Jesus's true identity and mission. The turning of water to wine is the first, and the raising of Lazarus is the seventh. These signs point us to a deeper reality; they invite us to see something of God that we might miss were it not for the signs. John puts forward faith as a lens – a pair of glasses, even – through which we're invited to view the world. That deeper reality that John invites us into is love. John invites us to see and feel God's love for the world, and God's love for us – a love that is more than we can ask or imagine. John invites us to see and feel that Jesus – the Word – came to dwell with us, and to draw us into that love forever. Jesus is, for us, as Christians, our way to find and feel and live out that love in this life and into the next.

This story of Mary and Martha and Lazarus draws us into that deeper reality. The details are a struggle – the dead resuscitated? – yet we are invited to

trust that nothing is impossible with God. We are invited to consider that in a world full of a trillion galaxies, we cannot fully understand the powers of nature. There is a drawing into a deeper reality, and there is also a pointing to community and connection. This is a story of real, human lament, weeping, suffering. This is Jesus in the midst. Jesus weeps, with Mary and Martha, and he weeps with us. God is with us, in our grief. As Lazarus comes out of the tomb, Jesus says “Unbind him, and let him go”. These words can serve as an invitation into a deeper reality, and into community and connection.

Today we’re celebrating All Saints’ Day – a day when we remember the saints who have gone before us. A day when we consider how they lived, and how we might also live. Sainthood is about both this deeper reality I’ve been talking about, and about community and connection. Just as I experienced a binding and unbinding when I completed that funeral planning assignment, sainthood is a commitment to a continual binding and unbinding through the whole of our lives. Sainthood recognizes God with us in all things, it recognizes the bond we have with God that can never be broken. Sainthood is about attuning to this deeper reality I’ve been talking about. It’s also about unbinding – peeling back layers of our humanity – layers of this world and life and experience – all of life’s joys, all its sorrows – to find and feel that bond of love – love for God, and God’s love for us.

Theologian Howard Thurman encouraged listening for the sound of the genuine in ourselves and in others – we might think of this as attuning ourselves to God in us, with us. There is an unbinding that happens in this process. There is a peeling back of layers of living that are false, phony, to find that which is genuine and true. What we find when we peel back those layers is: love. A love that is bigger than our imaginations, and stronger than anything.

From this place of authenticity and love – from this place of unbreakable bond that we have with God in and through Jesus – we are unbound from the things that weigh us down and hold us back in life. In our unbinding, we are free to move with God – to move with love – and to make meaningful connections with others.

This, too, is part of sainthood. Saints are remembered for these meaningful connections, especially with those who are vulnerable and marginalized. Lazarus came out of the tomb, hands and feet bound. Jesus didn’t

say “Lazarus, unbind yourself, and go on your way.” He said, “Unbind him, and let him go.” This is a call to participate in this unbinding together. We are invited to unbind together, and to seek that true, authentic, loving bond, together. In community.

There are 64 references to saints in the New Testament, and every single one is in the plural. This is an important reminder of our call, as followers of Jesus, to community and connection. To being with one another as God is with us.

There is vulnerability in our unbinding, in our peeling back of layers of experiences, both good and bad. We are called, as followers of Jesus to an awareness of this. To be attentive to – careful with – our own vulnerability, and with the vulnerability of others.

Irish poet and theologian Padraig O’Tuama wrote this prayer:

“Weeping Jesus, friend of Mary, Martha and their dead brother Lazarus. You wept when you were about to do what you knew would get you killed. And you did it anyway. Be with everyone making tough decisions. Because maybe there’s a way through. Amen.”

Life is full of tough decisions. Life is full of sorrow and suffering. Full of experiences that bind our hearts and souls and minds in unhelpful, unhealthy, heavy ways – holding us back, weighing us down. Jesus did know the kind of attention he’d get in raising Lazarus, but he did it anyway, to point us all to the kind of unbinding that reveals the true, genuine, loving bond that we all have with God. There is a way through our toughest decisions, our deepest sorrows. We find that way with love, trusting that nothing is impossible with God.

Unbind him and let him go. May this All Saints’ Day, and may Jesus’s raising of Lazarus, invite us all into unbinding. As we sing and pray and share in the Eucharist together, may you feel whatever is holding you back, whatever is weighing on you, loosen and lighten. In that unbinding, look deep within yourself and know that you are loved, that you are bound to God, always and forever. May that free you to move with God, and with love, when you leave this place, in all you do, in Jesus’ name. Amen.