

November 4, 2018
John 11:32-44

All Saints Sunday
Vicar Jonah Bruce

“Ah me Ducky, y’er a Saint”

The peace of Christ, be with you all.

I lived in Newfoundland for a short period while attending Memorial University. Anyone who has been to Newfoundland might testify that the people there are a kind hearted but “unique” sort of group. Even if you haven’t been to Newfoundland, you might have heard that you can recognize a Newfoundlander by their accent. In fact, each little port and geographical region of the province has their own unique variation of the Newfoundland accent in addition to their own terminology.

While living there, it took me a while to really figure things out. I was bombarded with phrases such as: “where ya to?” “oh me nerves” “what’da ya at?” and of course, my favorite expression: “yes b’y.” I’m uncertain if there are even clear definitions of these phrases. As soon as I thought I had them figured out, some Newfoundlander would laugh, slap me on the shoulder, and exclaim: “yes b’y, you mainlanders are da best kind.”

In addition to receiving a Master’s degree in Religious Studies, my time in Newfoundland taught me so much about the world. And every now and then, amidst what felt like backwardness and confusion, some Newfoundlander would shock me by saying something utterly profound.

While studying there, I worked in the kitchen at a retirement residence. When my work was completed, I would often help the other employees finish their assigned tasks. One day, after helping a girl named Holly finish off the dishes, which she hated doing, she turned to me and said “Ah me ducky, y’er a saint.”

I asked her what it took to become a ducky and a saint.

She responded “if y’er a ducky, y’er da best kind” and “no worries me trout, were all named da saint.”

As I prepared for All Saint’s Sunday, I couldn’t help but reflect upon Holly’s words. Today, we celebrate and remember the lives of the saints who have passed on before us, but we also acknowledge and give thanks for the sainthood that each of us are called to in and through the gift of Jesus Christ. When we accept the gift of salvation that comes by grace through faith, we too are called saints. And being a saint comes with the hope and the promise of life, both now and forever.

Just like my friend Holly, God sees each and every one of His children as saints, as heirs who

receive the gift of eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Martin Luther often put it, the people of God are from one perspective sinner and from another perspective saint. In our justification by faith, through grace, we become at one and the same time, both righteous and sinner.

But, even though I know and believe in the hope provided for me through Jesus Christ, I find that it is easy to forget or to get distracted from the reality of God's promises when faced with the challenges and uncontrollable circumstances of this life.

In addition to being a time of great learning, my stint in Newfoundland also felt like a tremendous period of darkness. I often felt as though God had abandoned me because no matter how faithful I was to the call of God, nothing in life was working in my favor. I spent so much of my time in mourning and I quickly lost focus of the promises of hope and assurance that I have because of Christ. The circumstances of life had begun to blind me from the love and presence of God.

Likewise, in today's gospel text, we read about the harsh reality of death that caused the friends and family of Lazarus to lose sight of the love and the power of God.

As the narrative suggests, Lazarus is sick. So, Mary and Martha send word to Jesus, saying "Lord, he whom you love is ill." It's interesting that their message doesn't say "come quickly" or "Jesus, please heal Lazarus." They simply inform Jesus that his beloved Lazarus is sick.

I think they trusted and assumed that Jesus would come and heal their brother - simply because he loves Lazarus. And isn't that what the gospel message calls us to do? To trust that God, who is rich in love and mercy, is there for us, especially when we need Him the most?

But, as is the case with Lazarus, in my experience at least, it sometimes feels as though God shows up too late. By the time that Christ arrived, the customary deathwatch was over; Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. It seemed that Christ was too late to preserve the life of Lazarus. And like his sister Martha, I have often caught myself arguing with God: "Lord, if you had only been here..." "Lord, if you had only been there, my loved one would not have suffered or died." "Lord, if you had only been there, I wouldn't have been forced to face such unfair and unjust circumstances." "Lord, if you had only been here..."

Just like the people in today's gospel text, it is easy to get distracted by the intensity of worldly circumstances and to lose sight of the promises of God. But a part of the beauty of today's story, and of our own story, is that Christ is more present in these circumstances than is often realized.

Jesus doesn't just show up, raise Lazarus, and then leave. Instead, we read that Christ was

present and experiencing the reality of the circumstance alongside of all who were mourning.

Christ mourned the reality of death with Mary and Martha, just as Christ presently mourns and suffers alongside of us. And, by the grace of God, today's story does not end with the death of Lazarus. It doesn't end with mourning. Nor does our story need to end with doubt, uncertainty, or suffering.

Christ calls out to Lazarus in the tomb and in a loud voice commands: "Lazarus, come out!" At the command of God, Lazarus rises from the dead and comes out with his hands and his feet bound. So Jesus says to those in attendance: "Unbind him, and let him go."

But in that moment, Christ is unbinding more than just Lazarus. As Lazarus rises from the dead, Christ unbinds Mary, Martha, and everyone who had come to mourn their friend. Christ unbinds them from their fear, from their anxiety, from their unbelief. And through the story of Lazarus, Christ reminds us that we need not be bound by fear of death in the grave. God is using the example of Lazarus to show us that He has power over both life and death and that we need not worry because God is here, and through Jesus, God offers a fullness of hope – a fullness of hope for life in our state of here and now that stands in addition to the hope of life after death.

There is no need to fear life nor death because Christ has made us saints. Christ, who has conquered both death and the grave, transforms all who trust and believe into saints in the eyes of God.

Or, to put it in the words of the Newfoundlander, in accepting the free gift that is Christ our Lord, "we are all made saints me duckies."

And as saints, there is a hope and a promise that God is ever present; a hope and promise that even when it seems too late or too difficult, God, who is full of love, has the power to unbind all people from the intensity of their circumstances. Just as Christ unbound all those who were present for the raising of Lazarus.

And because of our sainthood, because of who Christ is, both in and through us, we are called to see sainthood in one another. The children of God are called to unbind one another from anxiety or insecurity, from bitterness or hatred, from unforgiveness, from loneliness, from fear.

By sharing the message of God's love through both word and action, we invite a lost and dying world to participate in the fullness of life that comes through Christ Jesus, our Lord. In sharing God's love with and for all people, we acknowledge that all hold the potential for sainthood not because of what they do or what they have done, and not because of what we do or what we have done, but because of who Christ is and what Christ has done.

So, on this All Saints Sunday, I invite us to not only remember the lives of those who have gone on before us, but to also give thanks for the sainthood that Christ allows all of us to participate in. To give thanks for the fullness of hope that Christ provides both for this life and for life after death.

Friends, I encourage us to acknowledge the sainthood in one another so that rather than quarrel or disagree, we might love and support one another - so that we might go into the world and help unbind those who are lost and searching for the sense of purpose and hope that can only come through Jesus our Savior and Lord.

On this day and every day, there is reason to celebrate because God calls each of us into sainthood. There is reason to celebrate because God, who never tires or gets distracted, promises a free gift of life for all who believe. And there is reason to celebrate because one day we will be gathered together with God, and all the saints who have passed on before us, in that holy and eternal place.

In Christ we live. In Christ we will die. And in Christ we will rise again.

Amen.