

Saints and Saints

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Eagle River, Wisconsin

November 4, 2018 – All Saints' Sunday

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Texts: Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a

I'm going to begin by saying something that will shock some of you. But before you storm out, I ask you to hear me out. The shocking thing I'm going to say is that my pretty well educated guess is that if you asked a representative group of pastors whether they prefer to perform weddings or funerals, most of them would say funerals, hands down. It isn't that we're a particularly morbid group, and it certainly isn't that we wish our parishioners ill. In fact, it often has been a challenge for me to make it through a funeral without losing it emotionally.

Here's why many of us prefer funerals: weddings are often, but by no means always, characterized by a certain degree of magical thinking—that if the wedding is perfect, the marriage will be perfect. If it were true that a beautiful and expensive wedding is a guarantee for a happy and durable marriage, Hollywood would be a very different place. But unlike weddings, there is a stark reality about funerals. Weddings are about the future, about hopes, and yes, sometimes about illusions; they celebrate love discovered, but they mostly look forward to things that are to come. While funeral services should remind us of the resurrection, of life beyond death, our feelings at funerals are overwhelmingly about the sense of

loss that we feel now, and about our memories of the past. Even if we're consoled by the fact that a particular death may have come as a blessed release from pain and extended decline; even if we can celebrate a life well lived; funerals necessarily have to do with mourning and sadness. And mourning and sadness have their appropriate place in our lives; they are not feelings that we should try to avoid.

I remember my own feelings after my father's death at age 88. Before he died in a nursing home, his life had become pretty miserable. When I told my friends about his death and the suffering that preceded it, their response was to console me that he had lived a long and satisfying life. They were right about that, and they were also right when they assured me that his death had been a release. But even though both of these things were true, I still missed my father. There was a big empty place in my life that he used to occupy, and for months and even years after his death, I would start for the phone to call him with the latest news. Almost 20 years after his death, he still shows up in my dreams from time to time, never as the frail shadow he was at the end of his life, but as the vibrant and energetic father he will always be in my memories.

We like to say that a funeral is a celebration of life; in fact, we often put precisely that phrase at the heading of a funeral bulletin. And funerals do remind us how precious life is, what an extraordinary gift life is, and how precious and extraordinary this particular life has been. But a funeral also, and equally importantly, represents our recognition of the reality and of the necessity of death even as we celebrate the gift of life. Death is the great equalizer, we say, not because death makes us equal, but because death puts to rest any illusion that we have ever been anything other than equal. In that sense, no funeral is exclusively about the deceased; every funeral is about us as well, which is perhaps why funerals make so many people uncomfortable, why some people in fact opt not to

attend them, or why they're reluctant to plan a funeral for themselves, or to let others know their wishes for their own funeral.

The recognition of the reality of death, after all, is counter-cultural. We live in a death-defying and death-denying culture. Our ads suggest that ingesting, or wearing, or driving particular products will assure us of eternal youth. Even the older people who appear on our television screens trying to convince us to buy an amazing array of supposedly life-improving and life-extending products, even those older people are remarkably vigorous, inevitably smiling, and, yes, capable of doing just about anything the younger folks can do. So, along with death, we're at war with aging, and with all the negatives that accompany aging. We bridle at the thought of limitations, including the ultimate one, even though we know, in our heart of hearts, that aging and death are inevitable.

But death is not the enemy. Our real enemy is the fear of death that infects and diminishes the quality of our life. It's the fear constricts us, that makes us try to lead our lives so carefully that we're really not living at all. The fear of death, after all, can lead to the fear of life. People who, facing death, are able to embrace it, are a testimony to the quality of their own lives, and to the joy of life itself.

One of the reasons I am moved by funerals, why I encourage people to think about their own funerals and to discuss them with their loved ones before they're unable to do that, is that the funeral represents the last stage of a life's journey that began with baptism. What a gift it is that today we have celebrated a baptism on the day when we honor our departed saints! In former times, at the conclusion of a funeral, the body of the deceased was carried from the church sanctuary past the font where that person had been received as an infant into the community of the church and blessed in baptism by the presence of the Holy Spirit. They were carried by pallbearers led by the pastor to their final resting place in the church yard. It was a

kind of drama, a reminder to all who accompanied that person in life and now in death, that whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord, who is lord both of the living and of the dead. Funerals are a reminder that the loss of a loved one should not go un-noted and un-mourned, that tears are necessary, even as we know that the Lord of life will wipe away all our tears. Today's scripture lessons don't promise that there won't be tears; they promise that God will wipe away our tears.

Think of all Saints' Sunday as a kind of communal funeral for all those who have gone before us who were blessed by the gift of life, and whose lives blessed ours. The word "saint" has both a narrow meaning and wider one. The narrow meaning is the one that is defined by martyrdom and miracles. In the early church, each saint was given her or his own special day, usually the day of their martyrdom. But soon there were so many saints that there weren't enough days in the year to honor them, and so the church invented All Saints' Day.

And it's good to remember those saints. But those saints lived the virtues that we admire at a level that most of us can't attain, and so we learn from them. We learn from St. Francis' reverence for nature, an obsession that must have seemed odd in its time, but inspires us now that nature is so imperiled. We learn from Martin Luther King's courage and passion for justice, while so many who are called leaders in our time are really moral midgets. We learn from Mother Teresa's compassion for the poorest of the poor at a time when the poor of our cities and of our rural areas are so neglected as to be virtually invisible.

But we also remember the saints of the broader definition, people who were blessed by life and whose lives blessed ours. They're the people whose names we remembered and called out earlier in our worship service or whom we remembered in silence; they're people who have meant so much to us in our own

lives: parents, siblings, spouses, teachers, pastors, friends. They're people who lived lives of quiet heroism, who gave their families all the love they could muster, who cared for their neighbors, who worked selflessly and tirelessly in the church, who made the church more beautiful so that we would experience God's presence here more vividly, who played the organ or piano for worship services, who cleaned up the highways, who, though elderly themselves, visited the elderly in nursing homes, who served in the military or worked in the Peace Corps. So many paths to sainthood! For all of them we weep our tears, knowing that the God of love and compassion will wipe those tears away.

All of these, all who were saints in the narrow or the wider sense, all of them are with us in the Spirit as we join them in our sacred meal, the communion of the saints, the meal that brings together the church in every place and in every time. We join them at Christ's table, where we are the guests of the one who showed us what it means to live fully and to die meaningfully; the one who points our way toward eternity. Amen.