

Sermon – Where Joy and Sorrow Meet
All Saints' Sunday, November 1, 2015
Scripture – Isaiah 25:6-9, John 11:32-44
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Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 25:6-9. With the celebration of All Saints, the church recalls with gratitude the lives of our predecessors in faith, both distant forbearers and those who have departed from us this past year. We gather at the place where joy and sorrow meet looking backward. The prophet Isaiah invites us to look forward to the Messianic feast and the hope that shapes our ultimate tomorrow. Rather than judgment and doom, Isaiah imagines a scene out of *Babette's Feast*, with the God of creation spreading a table for all peoples and wiping away the tears from every face. May God open our hearts and minds to the hearing and understanding of God's Word.

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. 7 And God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; 8 God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of God's people God will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. 9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for God, so that God might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is John 11:32-44. We begin reading in the midst of John's account of Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead. In telling the story John is clearly setting the stage for Jesus' own death and resurrection: the historical event, which proclaimed Jesus Christ as the life-giving power of God. However, there is no denial of the reality of death or the tears Jesus shed for the friend he loved in this story. Listen now for God's Holy Word.

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."

The title of the sermon: Where Joy and Sorrow Meet

The text: "Jesus began to weep." John 11:35

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for entering into our humanity in Christ Jesus and joining us at the place where joy and sorrow meet. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I have learned, writes Judith Viorst in Necessary Losses, that in the course of our life we leave and are left and let go of much that we love. Losing is the price we pay for living. It is also the source of much of our growth and gain. Making our way from birth to death, we also have to make our way through the pain of giving up some portion of what we cherish. (page 368)

As we gather to remember and honor the saints whom we cherish, who have gone before us to meet their Maker, we find ourselves at the place where joy and sorrow meet. It is a time of sorrow to mourn their loss, and yet, simultaneously, we know joy in the memories we carry in our hearts. We gather to celebrate and to give thanks for their lives and for the lives that have been richer for knowing them. We are grateful for the utter delight of being a part of their lives and for the privilege of knowing these beloved children of God. And we are grateful for a God who weeps, who shares our sadness and who will wipe away our tears.

During my ministry some of the most intimate moments I have shared with members are those times of *losing and leaving and letting go*. And what I have learned is that all people really desire at the place where joy and sorrow meet is for us to be present with them and to respect and honor their loss without trying to deny it, take it away or make it better. Although this is always difficult, as people of faith it is possible because we believe in a God who is not only the author of life but who has the power to bring life out of death, new beginnings out of endings, and joy out of sorrow.

This idea of a life-giving God is not unique to the New Testament writers. Yahweh as life-giving is woven throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah declares that because the nature of God is to save, the day of God's coming is not a time to fear but a time of gladness and great joy. *Yahweh will swallow up death forever...the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.*

In John's gospel we see a very human Jesus becoming vulnerable to loss as he connects with the people God brings into his life. In fact John tells us that Jesus loved Lazarus. His death was a tremendous loss. Because there was such a deep affection between Jesus and this family, one must be careful not to overreach on the interpretation of Jesus' raising Lazarus. Jesus deeply loved this family; however his actions are not intended to take away the losses that are a part of our humanity. Mary and Martha both mention if Jesus had only been here—this would not have happened. By staying away until after Lazarus died, Jesus gently reminds us that he cannot protect those he loves from life's losses and neither can we.

Jesus didn't raise Lazarus from the dead so this family would not have to experience the pain of death, but rather as a sign to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed sent by God and had the power to give life. As one reads this story one cannot help but notice the many similarities and parallel phrases between this resurrection and Christ's own. So much here is reminiscent of Gethsemane, Golgotha and Easter:

Jesus is deeply moved and troubled. Jesus weeps. The tomb is near Jerusalem; the tomb is a cave with a huge stone covering it, the stone is rolled away. Jesus cries with a loud voice, the grave clothes are removed from the one who was dead but is now alive. As Fred Craddock, Professor Emeritus of

Preaching and New Testament at Emory puts forth, *One can hardly read the account and continue to think of Lazarus, one thinks of Jesus.*

According to John's gospel, the plot against Jesus' life began immediately following this incident. Jesus accepted his own death. In the garden of Gethsemane, we hear him speak these words, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour."

When we are called to face the losses that are a part of living and loving at the place where joy and sorrow meet, may we have the courage and grace of the One who joined us in our humanity, who wept at the death of his friend, and who then went on to conquer death by dying on a cross.

In one of her visions of Jesus, Julian of Norwich, medieval Christian mystic, realizes that Jesus is handsome, and the "handsome mixture" that she notes in him is "partly sorrow" and "partly joy." His face speaks of a knowledge of life's delight and a knowledge of life's pain. It is not a face that is naïve to the world's sufferings or to the personal experience of sorrow. Nor is it a face that is so overwhelmed by sorrow that it loses its openness and wonder. To be truly handsome, to be truly beautiful, is to reflect in one's countenance both life's glory and life's pain. It is not simply a sweet face, a pretty smile. It is a soul that has experienced the heights and the depths of human life. (A New Harmony by John Phillip Newell)

By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, in our living and in our dying, may we reflect the countenance, the beauty, the handsome mixture of the One who journeyed to the place where joy and sorrow meet.

Our faith does not deny death. *For everything there is a season ... a time to be born and a time to die.* Our faith announces the good news that death is not the last word. Deep in the human heart is the unquenchable trust that life does not end with death, that the One who created us will care for us beyond the bounds of our vision or understanding.

Because of Jesus Christ we can live with meaning, we can die with hope and we can celebrate the lives of the saints who have gone before us. In our living and in our dying, we belong to God. Amen.