

For ALL the Saints  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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“For ALL the Saints” Homily Pilgrim Church UCC November 2, 2014—All Saints Day (Matthew 23:1-12)

When I was growing up, there were these wonderful women at my church named Arlene and Addy—they were twin sisters who lived together and took care of one another until the end of their lives. Arlene and Addy always had smiles on their faces and kind words to say on Sunday mornings. Addy often touched my hair and would remark that my hair looked just like “spun gold!” Even though I didn’t hardly know these women, they became such anchors in the church for me—they made me feel special and like there were adults outside my family circle who cared. I can’t remember who died first, but the remaining sister only lived another year. It was sad to go to church and see only one of them in their pew and then an empty pew—just felt like such a loss for our congregation.

Every year on All Saints Day we remember saints of the church like Addy and Arlene. People who may not be well-known, and yet may have played important roles in our lives. We remember those we have loved and lost in our families and circles of friends. We can also remember famous figures we admire. Of course, Boston’s respected and longest serving mayor, Tom Menino, died just a few days ago. Now people are fondly remembering the “urban mechanic” and all he meant to those he served. Menino died just days before Christians observe All Saints Day, and honoring his memory certainly helps with those who are grieving.

Today we’ll explore what All Saints Day is and why All Saints Day matters. All Saints Day developed because there were so many saints and martyrs that were remembered in the Roman Catholic Church that the Church quite literally ran out of days in the calendar. The solution was to designate November 1 as the day to commemorate all the saints who couldn’t have their own specific date and whose names may have even been forgotten in some quarters of the church over time. In the Roman Catholic Church, all canonized saints are commemorated on November 1 and all the faithful who have died are commemorated on November 2, All Souls Day.[1]

Of course, Protestants have a habit of putting our own spin on things. With our belief in the priesthood of ALL believers and echoing Jesus’ teachings about humility, like we hear today in the Gospel of Matthew, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” we have historically combined these days. On All Saints Day we don’t just remember the famous figures of the Church, the exalted if you will. Rather, we tend to focus on those we have personally known and revered, the more humble. We combined All Saints Day and All Souls Day, with an emphasis on All Souls, and moved the commemoration to the first Sunday in November—today.

All Saints Day for Protestants revolves around giving thanks for any deceased person who has been influential in our spiritual formation and growth. We remember the influence every single life can have.[2] We are just as inclined to celebrate the Arlenes and Addys in our local churches as we are to celebrate Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Mary Magdalene, Paul, Peter, and the rest of the disciples. In fact, we are more inclined to name and pray for those in the local congregation and in our own families who have died in the past year. For Protestants, All Saints Day connects all of us as believers as we stand together, thankful for God’s grace and hopeful for resurrection and eternal life beyond death.

That's a little bit about what All Saints Day is, liturgically speaking—so why does it matter? In a culture where we seem to increasingly deny death and push aging and death as far away as possible, the Church stands as a witness to the inevitability of death and the belief that death is not the final word in God's story. In Christianity, we don't live in an endless cycle of Good Fridays, not when there's Easter waiting to dawn.

When it seems that more people are spiritual but not religious or uncomfortable with organized religion, the Church can still minister in times of personal grief. In some ways, our ministry to those who are grieving the death of a loved one and have no church home is even more important today. Sharon Wylie, a Unitarian Universalist minister, wrote a poem called "Nobody Needs a Church Or, Lament of the Ministers." Wylie writes, "And nobody wants a church until a loved one is dying or dead and suddenly it would be nice to have someone to give the eulogy, and people to bring the casseroles, and friends to sit and cry with . . . 'Where can I find people to connect with?' they ask, and 'Who can I talk to about my grief?' 'Who will visit my dying father?' and 'Who will pray for me?' I know the answers to these questions."<sup>[3]</sup>

When I was a hospital chaplain, the worst deaths I witnessed were people who were dying who had no faith—there were palpable feelings of hopelessness and despair and deep levels of fear. That's not to say that death wasn't difficult for people of faith. Anytime that someone dies tragically, whether they had a sudden accident or died in war or violently in any way or are simply far too young, death is rarely easy to face. But here's what I noticed—whether patients were Jews, Christians, Muslims, or other religious traditions—there were difficult conversations as people neared the end of their lives or a loved one lay dying, but there was rarely debilitating fear. As strange as it may sound, there were many beautiful deaths where families gathered around and told stories and we sang hymns and even prayed their loved ones into heaven. People who had some faith of some sort were often not strangers to death.

Matt Fitzgerald, one of the pastors I served with in Wellesley, wrote an article about this concept in *The Christian Century*. He wrote that he sees a difference between the grief of churchgoers and those who stay away. Matt says that everyone hurts, "But when death comes for a family member, there is often a sturdiness, a resiliency and a healthy sort of acceptance in the eyes of those who have baked cookies to serve at memorial teas, who have sung hymns at funerals of old saints or who have sat down, surprised to see an empty spot in the pew where a friend from a church committee had worshiped only weeks before. Churchgoers have grieved before; they've already felt death's sting."<sup>[4]</sup> Matt has served in churches for many years, and has noticed the differences between the grief of those who have some faith and the grief of those who have no faith at all. Most ministers can testify to this phenomenon, including me.

When you think about it, it makes sense. Before both grandmothers and one of my grandfathers died, I experienced the death of beloved church members as a child. I saw that empty pew where Addy and Arlene had worshiped. And this is what most children who grow up in intergenerational churches experience at some point. Babies are born and get baptized and people die and get buried. The Church stands ready to be God's presence in the midst of it all. Being together in the seasons of life helps us to be resilient, sturdy, and accepting of death—even as we grieve and even as we face our own deaths.

All Saints Day is a way for us to commemorate the great Cloud of Witnesses that go home to God before us. All Saints Day matters because it matters that people remember those who have died and that we remember in community. It matters because the story of new life and resurrection never gets old. We need to hear over and over again that God gets the last word in this life and the life to come—and that word is love. When we remember how our lives and simple acts of kindness can leave lasting impressions that outlive us, well, it helps strengthen us to lead humble lives worthy of remembrance, to love God and love God's world. May it be so with us, Amen.

[1] Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, 147-148.

[2] Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, 147-148.

[3] Sharon Wylie, "Nobody Needs a Church Or, Lament of the Ministers," October 29, 2014, <http://sharonwylie.com/2014/10/nobody-needs-a-church-or-lament-of-the-mi...>

[4] Matt Fitzgerald, "Acquainted with Grief: The Church's Way with Death," *The Christian Century*, June 3, 2012.