

Today, we observe All Saints'. For many of us, it's a tough day. And, for others of us, it's a *very* tough day. What can be so tough is how it's a reminder. A reminder to us that our loved ones are no longer here in this world. A reminder of the very day they left us. A reminder of the pain, the grief, the loneliness of having to go on . . . without them.

Yet, in the midst of those tears of sorrow, there's a chance at tears of joy. On a day like All Saints' we get another reminder—the bittersweet reminder that hey, our special saint is also just that, a *saint*. A saint is another word for holy, set apart, sanctified—and that's just what he or she is by the blood of Christ. After all, Christ is “the Lamb God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). “For God so loved this world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus promised, “When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). And so He has—offering Himself as the once-and-for-all payment for sin, Jesus has provided a way for every person to come home to God. If that's true for the world, if that's what Jesus declares is possible for all people, then that includes your dearly departed. What a blessed reminder today of the salvation the saints now enjoy! What a blessed reminder of the salvation we will one day enjoy *with* them!

During my first few years of ministry, I remember visiting with a woman who'd lost her husband just months before. Well, I'd wanted to see how she was doing now that the funeral was all over and the guests had all left. Of course during our visit I assured her that her husband was now safe and sound with his Lord. That even though death had trespassed into her home, on the cross Jesus had trespassed into death. And what He'd done by going into death was rearrange the furniture—He'd actually turned it into the very front door to God's house; turned death into *eternal life*! The resurrection of Jesus proves it—His rising from the grave declares that death's power is defeated, and that life forever wins.

But y'know something, after I got done I could tell I still had some more work to do. She was a faithful Christian, believed everything I just said, but I could see in her eyes she wasn't comforted. So, I let her talk for a little bit, and then finally it bubbled to the surface. “Pastor,” she said, “I just don't know what to do without him. Why, I always had Gordon to talk to. Now that Gordon's not around, it can be so hard sometimes. I miss talking to him.” After all, they'd been together for decades, gone through so much, he'd been there every day for her. All that time, they'd been a team, made so many joint decisions, he was her other half; but now she couldn't talk to Gordon anymore.

It wasn't until a few months later, that I could really relate to her. It was the last day my Mom spent on earth. I watched as she quickly slipped away in the hospital bed they'd set up for her in the living room. What was so strange was that in that moment I wasn't really mourning for my Mom. No, the Gospel took care of that—praise God! My Dad and I sang hymns to her, prayed together, exchanged the promises of Jesus—we knew how bright her future was. Instead, I was mourning . . . for *me*.

Soon, the time would come when I wouldn't have a Mom anymore to talk to. What was I gonna do then? I mean, this is the woman who'd raised me, been there all my life. I was still just getting on my feet—a fairly new marriage, new profession, new house—what if I needed advice? Or what if I had a down day or felt lost, how could I hear her encouragement? And, *dear God*, my firstborn was still on the way—where would she be without her grandma? What was I going to do if I could never talk to my Mom again?

The preacher Will Willimon told of his experience one day after church. They'd just gotten done with Sunday service, and this lady came up to him and asked if he'd accompany her to the cemetery. She wanted him to go out and say a prayer or something . . . but there was a twist. She wanted the pastor there when she tried to contact her recently deceased father. You see, she'd hired a professional “medium,” y'know, someone who offers to help people contact the dead. This person would say the magic words or wave their hands in just the right way and they'd be able to somehow get the deceased on the other line.

Of course, Willimon didn't go out there with her. He told her that as Christians, we don't do that sort of thing. Not only is it forbidden in the Bible, but usually if that stuff seems to actually work it's just demons—not loved ones—who are picking up. We don't mess with that. But she went on without the pastor anyway.

Well, a week later Willimon visited her. She was very disappointed. The medium didn't end up working out. Her deceased father was never contacted.

Today, while you and I might've done things different than she, we might think that's all hocus-pocus. At the same time, maybe many of us can understand her desperation. I mean, this dear woman had depended on the love, guidance, and care of her father for so long. When he'd died, she was terribly alone. She now had all sorts of decisions she had to make on her own—she had problems to solve but now no parental help. But more than anything, she wanted to hear his reassuring voice once again. While misguided, maybe we know how she feels.

I know the disciples did. On Good Friday, they began to go through something similar—then, for three whole days they went without their dear Teacher's voice. But suddenly, on Easter Sunday He was back. He had returned from the dead, and they enjoyed His company once again. But that only lasted forty days—see, on Ascension Thursday their risen Lord said it was time to go again—this time for good. Now, He'd be ascending to the right hand of the Father—going into eternity, while leaving them far behind. Again, they were back to wondering how they'd move on without His leadership, His direction, His teachings. Already, they could feel themselves longing for the sound of His voice.

So, after their ascended Lord had been gone for ten days, there they were with yearning hearts. When all of a sudden, Pentecost came—they heard the sound of a loud rushing wind filling the room. And once again, this time by the power of the Holy Spirit, they could hear their Lord speak. It must've dawned on them, all that Jesus had told them about how that day would come.

For example, here's what Jesus promised in John's gospel—"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (14:18). And here's how Jesus says that He'll come—"The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all these things and will remind you of everything I said to you" (14:26). Did you get that? The Holy Spirit comes in Jesus' name bearing Jesus' teaching—"When he, the Spirit of truth, comes," Jesus says, "he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you" (16:13-15). In other words, when the Holy Spirit talks, the disciples are hearing none other than the voice of Jesus. Amazingly, when the disciples are gathered at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes whooshing in, it's actually Jesus who's the one doing the talking. Here, these disciples left on earth have communication with heaven itself.

While a medium was the wrong way to go about it—y'know, we're Christians and we're not into that sorta thing—yet maybe that lady was on to something. Maybe God does give us an official way of contacting those on the other side. Maybe for us heaven's not so far away, but we actually have those saints—made alive in Christ—still speaking to us today.

Just think of the First Reading this morning, we had two-thousand year old John of Patmos sharing his divine revelation with us. And then, David the famous shepherd and king, had us sing along with one of his ancient psalms. Next, John spoke to us again from his first epistle. And in the Gospel, Matthew the evangelist recounted the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. They're all saints who've gone on before us, yet we can still hear their words to this day. Or how about Bernard of Cluny (12th century), or William W. How from the 1800s, Hans Adolf Brorson from the 1700s, or William J. Irons—ever heard of them? Well, you gave them voice in the hymns today—it was their hymn texts that you heard. And that's not even getting into the liturgy itself, what Christians worldwide for nearly two millennia have been praying.

But it's not just the words of the saints that have come through to us this morning, but their very voices. You see, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, you and I come to find out we are not alone. John's Revelation of the saints gathered before the Lamb is a picture of what is happening right now. The wall separating heaven and earth comes crashing

down; the future forgiveness, life, and salvation of heaven's kingdom comes pouring into our present; and we worship with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. It's like the tip of the iceberg—on this side, all you might see is this tiny church. But on the other side, there's the rest of it—"a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9). We might not see all that is hidden, but as it turns out this place is packed to the rafters.

When we sing the hymns of heaven—hymns like the "Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth," which the angels sang at Jesus' birth; or "Holy, Holy, Holy," like the prophet Isaiah heard in heaven's throne room; or "This is the Feast," like John heard in his heavenly vision—when we sing those hymns it's not just a rehearsal, folks. We're not just warming up, learning the words, so that someday we too can finally sing along when we join heaven's chorus. No, we sing what they're already singing in heaven because we believe heaven's with us. Our voices blend with Isaiah's, with David's, with John's voices right now. Our voices blend with those of the angel choirs even as we speak. Our voices even blend with those saints whom we have loved and lost, and who we remember today. In a very real way, we are in contact—they are not far away but nearer than we realize. You might not see them but they see you—here at church, you are joined together around your Lord. In the book of Acts, you know what the disciples do on Pentecost right around the time they receive heaven's transmission? They have church. That's not a coincidence.

For Like us, the Choe family also had a communication problem. They had been a family together—Florence and Jay, and their little daughter Kristin—before Lieutenant Florence was deployed to Afghanistan in 2008. Now, 7,500 miles away, how could Florence still be a part of her little girl's life? How could Kristin stay in touch with her mom? Fortunately, Florence had been connected with a group called United Through Reading. What they would do was record military parents, like Florence, reading storybooks and then send a copy of the DVD to their children.

For her first DVD, Florence had chosen "Cinderella." When the package arrived, it was as if the Fairy Godmother herself was inside. Jay popped the DVD into the player and settled on the floor with their daughter Kristin. As Florence appeared on screen, Kristin yelled, "Mommy!" and ran to kiss the TV. Every day, sometimes multiple times a day, she'd sit and watch the video on repeat. Later would come a few more titles: "Good Night, Gorilla," "The Cat in the Hat," and "Llama Llama Red Pajama."

But a year later, when Florence was tragically gunned down by an Afghan soldier before turning the gun on himself, the question of how she and Kristin could keep in contact only grew. Mysteriously, a few weeks later, a new DVD showed up at the house. It was sent just before Florence's passing, yet it still seemed miraculous. They might not be together in the same way, but Kristin still got to watch her mom yet again, hear her voice one more time as she read another story, and feel their connection.

For us and our loved ones, things might also be different now. But every Sunday, we don't just get a recording, but are actually reunited with our saints yet again. And as we hear them speak to us throughout the service, our voices blending with theirs, together we join in retelling the greatest story ever told—the *only* story that really matters—the story of the salvation we share in Jesus Christ. And by our Lord we are connected one more time.