

“For All the Saints...” by Marjory Zoet Bankson

4 November 2012

Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost

Gospel Reading: John 11:32-44 ... (Jesus) cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out! 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.”

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This week, we celebrate **All Saints’ Day**, which falls on November 1, and **All Souls’ Day**, which falls on November 2. The Feast of **All Saints** can be traced back to Pope Gregory III (circa 741), who dedicated an oratory in St. Peter’s for the relics of saints and martyrs. The Feast of **All Souls** developed during the Medieval period in connection with the dogmatic invention of purgatory. It was celebrated primarily in homes by lighting candles and leaving food for troubled souls or ancestral spirits who were, according to Catholic doctrine, awaiting entry into heaven.

During the Reformation, these two Catholic feast days were fused into one, **All Saints’ Day**, by the breakaway Protestants, who rejected the doctrine of purgatory and began to equate saintliness with all baptized Christians – a position which they traced back to the earliest days of the Christian church.

More recently, these two feast days of the church have been trivialized and commercialized in the U.S., into a candy-grabbing costume party for children that we call **Halloween**. Although it started as a sacred occasion, as “All Hallows Eve,” Halloween seems to be growing in popularity as a secular holiday which gives people a chance to dress up and pretend that death does not scare us at all.

But, of course, it does.

Death does scare us. And the process of dying scares us even more.

The Gospel reading assigned for All Saints' Day is the story of Lazarus which we have just heard – how Jesus didn't come in time to save his friend – how the two sisters, Mary and Martha, each confronted Jesus with their belief that Lazarus would not have died if he had just come when they called. It's a story of death and physical resuscitation, not resurrection.

The story also contains the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." In the story, onlookers speculated about Jesus' tears. I do too. Were his tears simply grief over losing his beloved friend? Or because he had disappointed Martha and Mary? Were his tears because he felt powerless over death in that moment? Or because he knew that he would soon die as well? Or because the people seemed so clueless about what was happening?

For me, the simple statement that "Jesus wept" makes him human – makes him one of us. And it quickens my interest around the issue of death as a passage to new life.

Jesus wept, and then he told the onlookers to "roll away the stone." With that, the author of John's Gospel creates an overtone of Jesus' impending death. "Who will roll away the stone," the women said to each other, as they came to reclaim the body of Jesus.

Then Martha brings us back to Lazarus with her practical comment: "O no, Lord. His body will stink! He's been dead four days." In other words, there is NO DOUBT that he is dead.

But Jesus prayed, and then cried out to Lazarus: "Come out!" And so he did, still wrapped like a mummy. Smelly or not, we don't know. But this is not an instance of resurrection. The tomb was not empty. The cloths were not left lying about as they would be when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb after Jesus' death. It's a preview, not the main focus.

Jesus then gives a simple order to the people gathered round: "Unbind him."

That's the work of community, to unbind what Jesus has brought back to life.

At Seekers, that's the work of community. We ourselves are not the healers. Like Mary and Martha, sometimes we are the ones to call attention to places and persons who need healing, knowing that there is some mysterious power connected with our prayers—something we do

not control or understand. But we are not the healers. In this context, a saint may be one who has enough faith to pray, to call out for Jesus' healing touch.

Back in 1963, Elizabeth O'Connor wrote an article for Faith At Work magazine, titled "What We Need is More Saints." That article caught my attention when I read it in 1965, while Peter was getting ready to go to Vietnam, at a time when we were both scared of living and scared of dying. Tears were never far away. We lived in Georgia then, and I had never heard of Church of the Saviour until I read her article.

The saints that Elizabeth O'Connor wrote about were people like you and me, who were taking their spiritual lives seriously, who wanted to be intentional about following Jesus into the streets and alleys of Washington, DC, and were willing to be accountable to one another through something she called "mission groups." As a good Presbyterian, I had never heard of such commitment and accountability. I thought that was for nuns and priests, or maybe for ordained clergy, but certainly not for ordinary people who were struggling to make a living in the modern world.

Something in O'Connor's article grabbed me and wouldn't let go. Were saints simply people who wanted to follow Jesus? Who were willing to make a commitment to others on the same journey? She gave me hope that somewhere there was a company of ordinary people who took their faith seriously, who would not trivialize it, or mock it as childish. The way she wrote about Church of the Saviour and its' ministry at the Potter's House made me want to belong to such a company of saints. I wanted to be "in that number" here and now, in this life. I was looking for a company of saints, and not the Halloween version.

By the time we moved here in 1976, both Peter and I had read all of Elizabeth O'Connor's about Church of the Saviour. We were eager to explore it in person. But when we arrived, the Church was dividing into five little churches: Dayspring, Eighth Day, Festival Church, Seekers and Potter's House. I thought Church of the Saviour, like Lazarus, had died. We were shocked and sad to have arrived too late.

Although there was considerable chaos among the 120 members who were aligning themselves into these different church groupings, there was no stench of death. Instead, there was a flurry of activity—many signs of new life sprouting. Peter and I started going to classes in the

School of Christian Living because that was a prerequisite for joining a mission group. After two classes, each of us joined a mission group – something that was restricted to intern members in the original church, but not at Seekers.

In those days, it was not possible to do what we did here two weeks ago – to declare membership simply because we were wanted to be intentional about our spiritual lives through this community. That was a Seekers' invention. Seekers also broke new ground by establishing a mission group to support ministry in daily life: Mission Support Group. I joined that one. We became core members (as Stewards were called then) as soon as we could. It seemed like a natural progression for deeper involvement.

I didn't really understand what belonging to a mission group might do to “unbind” the parts of me that were being called into new life by Christ until we left Seekers in 1980. When Peter got orders for Germany, we withdrew from membership here, and lived for two years without the weekly mission group meetings which had begun to shape us into ordinary saints.

After Peter retired from the Army in 1982, we moved back here, but didn't rush back into core membership. To be honest, it felt good to be free of the obligation for personal disciplines, weekly meetings, and intentional giving, but that didn't last long. We missed the sense of belonging and being known that comes with mission group membership. We missed writing and thinking theologically in a more disciplined way. We missed shaping and being shaped by the monthly Stewards meetings. In short, we missed being an integral part of this body of Christ. And the shocking thing to both of us was this—that people cared, but they did not pressure us to belong. It was to be a call from God and a free choice for us to make.

In a more conventional church, somebody would have been recruiting us for a job or task that needed to be done, asking us to run for office or chair a committee. But here, at Seekers, the invitation to be more intentional about our spiritual growth was always there. True, it's more visible during recommitment season, but it's always present and waiting for our response.

Two weeks ago, 46 of us (including 9 youth) signed the book as members of Seekers. And 17 more signed as active and emerita Stewards,

making a total of 54 adult members. All of us have promised to be intentional about our commitment to Seekers, trusting that God will continue to bring new life into those parts of our lives which we thought were dead and buried. All of us have pledged to be regular in our attendance and our giving for the coming year. And as a community, to remember that our role is to unbind one another, as the friends of Lazarus did –as all saints do.

All Saints' Day is a time to acknowledge those who have died, people who have been imperfect saints and sometimes troubled guides for us. Each year, the Living Water Mission Group installs new tiles on the Memory Wall in the back stairwell for anyone who was directly connected to someone in Seekers. This year, we have no new tiles to add (unless you want to email me the name and dates of someone that you wish to add). There is no cost involved. The wall is simply a way to name those saints who have gone before us. And we invite you to offer your special prayers at the wall during coffee hour, after our service.

In addition, we have a Memory Book in the Skylight Room, where the stories of saints in Seekers are kept. We invite you to make your own page in whatever way you would like to be remembered, knowing that you can always update or change your page. We'd like you to tell your own story rather than have someone else list your credentials and accomplishments.

Lastly, I invite you to close your eyes and breathe deeply into the invisible communion of saints who surround us in spirit. These are your "balcony people," the ones who have been guides, models and encouragers for you. As the author of Hebrews reminds us, "We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." As we feel their presence here with us, please say their names aloud or silently.....

Gracious and loving God, we give You thanks and praise for all these saints who have gone before us. They have lighted the way for us. May we too, be light for others who seek your face.

AMEN.