

For All the Saints

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**Twenty-fourth Sunday after
Pentecost**

Text: John 11:32-44

Today we celebrate all the saints who have gone before us – people who have shown us the way to live God's intention for

human life.

Although we may have grown up with a definition of what it means to be saintly as being exceptionally pious or bearing burdens without complaint, today we can broaden our definition of sainthood to include people who exemplified *wholeness or completeness*. In the class that John Morris and I led recently, we recognized that the root word for salvation is the Latin word *salvus*, which means *wholeness or completeness*. In other words, Saints are people who show us the way to new life. They are juicy! Compassionate! Connected to God's evolving design for creation! As Howard Thurman says, they are people who are fully alive!

Before I move to the biblical text assigned for today, I want to say a word about the **visual text for today** – which you can see downstairs in the needle tapestries of my friend, Lois Kramer. She calls them *Icons of Childhood*, and most were done after the unexpected death of her husband, Howard, from covid. Lois stitched her way into the darkness of her own grief and found there the miracle of new life. You will see that after worship today, when we gather downstairs for the opening of her show to celebrate her upcoming 85th birthday. Lois shows us how to be fully alive again!

As Anne Lamott says in our reflection paragraph, *You can't get to any of these truths by sitting in a field smiling beatifically, avoiding your anger and damage and grief. Your anger, damage and grief are the way to the truth... then we will be able to speak in our own voice and to stay in the present moment. And that moment is home.*

Our biblical text for today is the raising of Lazarus, which ends with the intriguing command from Jesus to the curious crowd, "Unbind him!" That will be my thread for this sermon.

God sparks new life, but it's a loving community that can release those gifts into the world. That is our work!

John's text actually gives us a glimpse of that unbinding work as the story continues beyond this lectionary reading. It describes a celebratory banquet at which Martha serves without complaining and Mary accepts the upcoming death of Jesus by slathering expensive burial ointment on his feet while jealous onlookers plot to kill both Lazarus and Jesus – as though to snuff out this preview of resurrection. The work of unbinding is a celebratory meal in the face of imminent destruction. It is a courageous act of human love and tenderness. . The celebration of new life challenges their power structures – drains away their power to frighten people – or simply confronts fear with hope!

Unbinding Lazarus continues to happen in different ways throughout the ages. Here at Seekers, we claim Jesus as the primary example of God's intention for human life, but in each generation, there have always been saints – those who show us the way to justice and mercy, guide us toward wholeness, and make a significant contribution to being a living, breathing Body of Christ here and now.

The saints I would name were not super-nice people. In fact, they were often a little peculiar, unique characters who didn't quite fit the social norms. You probably know some too. Let's take a few minutes just to say their names into our midst: **[say names aloud or whisper them in your heart]**

Today I want to introduce you to a saint that many of you met on the work-pilgrimages that Peter and I led to Guatemala between 2002 and 2017. [Ask all those who went on one of those trips to raise their hands.]

His name was Fr. Greg Schaffer, and he spent most of his adult life in San Lucas Toliman, an ordinary indigenous village on Lake Atitlan. Fr. Greg was a young parish priest when his

bishop sent him to a mission church in San Lucas for 2 years. This big, genial Swedish man with fair skin fell in love with the people there – and stayed there until he died of skin cancer nearly 50 years later.

When he came in 1964 he said, he knew nothing about community development. But he knew not to expect anything from the Guatemalan government or conservative Catholic Church hierarchy, so he started with what they had: the people of San Lucas and a Catholic parish back in New Ulm, Minnesota.

By the time we arrived in 2002, the San Lucas church was sponsoring a primary school, a medical and dental clinic, a coffee-roasting cooperative, a reforestation project, and micro-lending for starting small businesses in San Lucas. There was a robust program of young volunteers from Minnesota to help with many projects and our group of 20 pilgrims were always welcome to eat a simple meal with them in the fellowship hall. By then, the streets were being paved, one brick at a time, and the church was a hub of hopefulness.

I was reminded of the Lazarus story when we learned that during the 30-year war, which ended in 1996 with the promise of voting and primary education for the indigenous people, Fr. Greg had voluntarily offered himself as a hostage while the Army searched the town for guerillas – an excuse they often used for occupying towns and killing local men. Throughout the war, he negotiated with the Army to protect the village from a massacre like one that happened not ten miles away, in Santiago.

Not only did Fr. Greg protect new life in San Lucas Toliman, but he led the people in unbinding their own gifts and leadership – which has allowed the village to thrive beyond his death in 2012. Today, Seekers continues to support the reforestation project in San Lucas because so many of us were touched by Toribio Chajil's leadership there. (Toribio's picture illustrated my InwardOutward reflection yesterday.)

At Seekers, we honor those saints who have had a close connection with this congregation by adding a tile to the Memory Wall in the back stairwell and adding a description of that person to the Memory Book, which you can see in the Skylight Room today. It normally lives in a rack next to the Memory Wall in the back stairwell and still needs updating for those who died during the covid years when we were not worshipping here in person.

This year, we have only two deaths to commemorate: Vince Shepherd and Emmy Lu Daly.

Vince died last year in November, at age 66. Vince came to us homeless, stripped of his self-worth. He lived with Pat and Trish for a time and found work as a cook at Charley's Place, a feeding program for the homeless out of St Margaret's Church in DC. Over time, we learned that he loved jazz, professional sports and stylish clothes. Vince became a Steward because his mission group, Mission Support, was in danger of losing its status when another steward moved away, but he never liked the debate of policy-making and rarely spoke unless it was to share about his life. He learned vegetarian cooking to offer his skills for the School of Christian Growth. Later he worked for the Hebrew Retirement Home and looked for an apartment of his own. When Vince developed cancer, Dave drove him to many of his appointments at Johns Hopkins and Trish helped him reconnect with his family in Chicago. Today we celebrate Vince as one of the saints among us.

Emmy Lu was both our "celebrated centenarian" and an eager performer, always ready with a song or poem. Emmy Lu arrived at Seekers after the theater company at Potter's House, where she had found new life for herself, set down its call. She lived at Sarah's Circle, a residence for low-income seniors in Adams-Morgan, and worked at L'Arche in order to secure a spot for her son, Fritz. Because of her heart by-pass surgery, I think Emmy Lu expected death some 15 years before it happened. That bonus period gave her time to expand her wings as "The

Divine Miss Em" – performing "golden oldies" in various retirement homes before she herself moved into the Armed Forces Retirement Home as a result of her WW II service in the Navy. We miss her gravelly voice and ready smile: another beloved saint.

Vince and Emmy Lu each taught us something about unbinding new life when old ways have died.

Today we will be celebrating communion by standing in a circle around this room. Vince and Emmy Lu, along with the others you have already named, will be here with us. Our collective memory brings us together, past and present. Here we are, broken and whole, all at once.

Whenever we gather in a circle like this, I feel the presence of those saints. Even though they are not with us in person, their spirits are here. If there are others whom you would like to name into this circle before we celebrate communion on this ALL SAINTS DAY, here is another chance to name them aloud or in the silence of your heart:

Closing Prayer: O Holy One, may you continue to quicken the life of this Body of Believers, that we may truly be your presence in the world, now and in the days to come. Amen.