

Summary:

“Unbound and Let Loose,” a message for All Saints Sunday by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Sunday, November 3, 2019

Detail:

As I was studying and preparing to craft this message this week, I came across a reflection from Rev. David Lose, whose work you have heard me reference more frequently lately. His thoughts and reflections have impacted greatly my thinking about this day and this scripture and forms the foundation of my message for you today.

Our readings for today are the traditional lectionary scriptures for All Saints Sunday, Year B. And I say All Saints **Sunday** as opposed to All Saints **DAY** because All Saints **Day** is always November 1st, the day following Halloween. All Saints Day only falls on a Sunday every few years or so.

It's easy for me to remember that All Saints Day is November 1st because that was my mother's birthday - she would have been 98 years old this year - and she was a saint - she **HAD** to have been in order to have put up with my siblings... and perhaps me.

But we may wonder, why this story of the raising of Lazarus for All Saints Sunday? And this question takes on greater urgency, and perhaps requires more thoughtful consideration, in light of the on-going and regular occurrences of violence, shootings, and mass shootings in our society these days. How do we think about this passage when considered alongside the trial and conviction of Quentin Smith this week for the killing of two Westerville police officers? How do we think about it when the Columbus Dispatch Metro

section, every day this week, detailed multiple shootings that have taken place in and around Columbus just this week?

And then there is the epidemic of mass-shootings. According to the on-line source, *Gun Violence Archive*, a mass shooting is defined as a shooting where four or more people are shot at the same time. As of September 24 of this year, so far in the U.S. there have been 334 such shootings, or 1.24 per day, in which 1347 people were injured and 377 died - a total of 1684 victims in a little less than 3/4 of the year.

The large-scale violent taking of lives surrounds us each and every day.

In this light, it gives rise to other questions as well.

Why does this passage matter? Or, does it matter at all? What does it say not just to this festival of All Saints but to our life in this chaotic and violent world?

Why this quaint festival of remembrance at all, for that matter? How does what we do speak into, let alone help, in a time of such polarization, fear, and hatred?

So as we consider together the enormity of these questions, I want to invite you to think about them from a different angle this morning, and perhaps raise some other questions as well.

First, why *this* passage on All Saints?
And with that, which character in this story, if any, helps us understand what it means to be a saint?

Is it Mary, her heart grief-stricken, who gives voice to not simply a question but a lament, even an accusation: *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!”* Perhaps Mary represents all those who come to church on All Saints Sunday heavy in heart, the grief of their loss still fresh to the point of being overwhelming. We can relate to Mary’s grief, can’t we?

Whether or not we’ve experienced the violent death of another, we’ve certainly experienced a sudden, unexpected death of a friend or loved one.

We’ve all questioned, “is there something more I could have done?” We know Mary’s grief.

Or is it Martha, who had asked the same question as her sister Mary only moments earlier, and then saw her question and grief transformed into a courageous confession, not simply about resurrection in general –

“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” – but into a particular confession in Jesus, the one who intentionally delayed coming as her brother died, yet who promised her life here and now: *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*

Perhaps Martha stands for all those whose faith in Jesus seems incredibly resilient and who serve as both witness and encouragement for the rest of us.

Or perhaps we should focus should on Lazarus, the one Jesus called forth from the tomb.

Lazarus is Jesus’ seventh, final, and – until Jesus’ own resurrection – greatest of Jesus’ seven signs as recorded in John. The number

seven in scripture signifies, wholeness, completion, even perfection - in Genesis all of Creation takes place, and is declared "very good" in seven days. Lazarus stands as the promise of Jesus literally embodied, one whom death had taken...but could not hold onto. He serves as a reminder of and testimony to Jesus' power over even death, and each of us has met people who have come through such difficult circumstances that they may well serve as a sign, a contemporary Lazarus for us.

Of course, the character of greatest interest in this story is Jesus, the one who gives life, who calls us out of not *just* death, but even our *fear* of death.

The one who weeps for Lazarus and his sisters and, I think, for those who are nearby and neither understand nor yet believe in God's promise of life.

The one who, in raising Lazarus, starts the chain of events that will lead to his own death (11:53).

The one, finally, whom death itself cannot contain.

"I am the resurrection and I am life," Jesus promises Martha earlier in this story (11:25), and then demonstrates his fidelity first by raising Lazarus and then again and more fully on Easter morning.

Any of these characters might help us understand anew the importance of the promise of resurrection that stands at the center of all our Sunday celebrations but that is perhaps even more prominent on the Sunday of All Saints. We could focus on any of them briefly, identifying with one and hearing the promise of Jesus addressed to them. We could...

But today, I would direct our gaze to one more place at the end of this story, to one more person or, really, persons: those in the crowd who witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus and to whom Jesus commands: *“Unbind him, and let him go!”*

This part of the story is particularly intriguing, even compelling, because it reminds us that even God’s work of resurrection is not quite complete without *our* participation, without *our* being caught up in the act itself.

It’s not so much that God *needs* us to do God’s work of resurrection, it’s that God’s work of resurrection isn’t *limited* simply to those whose life is renewed in the moment - in this case, Lazarus - but finds its fulfillment as it also catches up, impacts, even transforms those who witness and are drawn into it.

“Unbind him, and let him go!” Jesus commands.

This is an invitation to be drawn into God’s life-giving work, to participate in, extend, and in some sense complete the reach of God’s mighty acts.

It’s a promise that resurrection isn’t simply a matter of “then,” some point in a distant future (think of Martha’s mention of the Day of Resurrection) but is also and equally a matter of “now.”

Now there is something to do.

Now we find courage to live amid fear.

Now we sense God’s promise of life helping us not only live in the shadow of death with confidence but also resist the power of death that we concede to, perhaps, too quickly.

God’s promise of resurrection isn’t an invitation to *deny* death – the death rate is and always has been, and always will be 100% - as a

sign in the men's room at my last church says, "Relax, nobody gets out of here alive!"

But God's promise of resurrection does grant us both the permission and power to *defy* it: to defy death's ability to overshadow and distort our lives, to deny death's threat that there is nothing else, to deny those who believe that because they have the ability to inflict death - with guns or bombs or cars driven into crowds - that they are somehow the most powerful people on earth. They are not. In fact... they are among the weakest.

This story, and the Easter story that it prefigures, promises that death does **not** have the last word, and therefore that we are free to **live now**, to **struggle now**, to **sacrifice now**, to encourage others never to give up **now**, to live out of love rather than hate **now**, and to have our actions directed by hope rather than fear...**now!**

In light of God's resurrection promise, death should

no longer terrify us, not the death of the loved ones

we remember on this day, nor our own.

But, and just as importantly, **because** of God's resurrection promise, the **life** we share in this world here and now no longer terrifies us either. The massacre of innocents, the incessant drumbeat of the politics of fear and division, the ongoing and on-growing rhetoric of hate – these are heart wrenching elements of our life in the world, but **they** do not have the last word either.

And they are **not** the final reality.

In the story, we read that Jesus weeps.

And we may wonder why that is when we know that he knows that he is going to raise Lazarus to new life in a matter of minutes.

Why does Jesus weep? He weeps because he knows that the pain, the grief and loss of death, of violence, of hatred is painful to endure.

He weeps because he has come alongside us in full and complete compassion for the hurt that comes with life.

But prompted by God's promise of resurrection - both now and on that day - we can stand against those who wield death, fear, and hatred. We can hold onto each other even as we live amidst them. And we can offer a testimony, rooted in life and in love, that counters their broken and distorted testimony of the world.

So this Sunday, we give thanks for those saints who have gone before us – those we remember, grieve, and for whom we celebrate their place now in the arms of a loving God. But we also give thanks for those saints who are sitting here, in front of us, behind us, and beside us, who have heard the word of resurrection and now are called by that same Jesus to unbind all those we encounter who are bound by the fear of death - death of any kind, physical or spiritual. Called to unbind and to let go those who are struggling to find hope. We are invited this week – always, of course, but especially this week – to remember and celebrate that the God who raised Jesus from the dead still *needs* us, *wants* us, *invites* us to participate in, extend, and even complete God's resurrection work by caring for, standing with, and lending our courage to those who are suffering and grieving, those who are most vulnerable and in need.

Look around you. Look at the people in the pews in beside you, in front of and behind you. We have here in our midst today, I believe, a veritable host of saints who, while you are here amongst us and not

yet in heaven, have work to do, a call to answer, a resurrection life to live - here and now.

“Unbind him, unbind her, and let them go!” is both our mandate and our marching orders, for the God who answered Jesus’ prayer in bringing Lazarus forth from the tomb, the God who raised Jesus from death, the God who promises us life eternal... *this God is not finished yet!* And we are the instruments of God’s resurrection life, grace, and power here and now.

For in Jesus Christ, we too, are unbound and let loose. Amen.