

Sermon: Where We Abide

Year B, All Saints

[Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44](#)

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For those who ask, then, Why have saints? the answer is, Why not have saints? Every generation needs heroes. It is not that saints are humans who have become divine. It is that saints are humans who have become fully human, fully the best that a human can be, fully attuned to life at its most meaningful. The saints are those around us in tiny neighborhoods and spacious offices who confront us daily with the great questions of life and bring to them the answer of themselves.¹

Sermon

Where do we abide? We live in Brookline or Hollis or Milford. But where do we abide?

There is a part of Sanjay and Melanie that abides in the music they offered today in worship. There is a part of Ethel Long that abides in all those turkey dinners at yesterday's Senior Luncheon. There is a part of Rod Lockwood that abides in Moxie as she snoozes at the back of the sanctuary. There is a woman I have never met, who has long since been laid to rest, who abides on a 3x5 card in my kitchen, because I have a profound tenderness for her. My grandmother's recipe for Welsh Rarebit reads, "Mrs. Norman S. McKendrick *says* this is never lumpy."

We abide in the places where we are kept, where we remain, from which we do not leave. We abide in the places where we endure, where we last, where we do not perish.²

I have friends who both have high pressure jobs in Manhattan. Every night when they get home to New Jersey, they make dinner together and catch up with each other over a glass of wine. When their daughter was young, she was plunked in her high chair. But they included her when they clinked wine glasses and said "Cheers." At their first parent/teacher conference in kindergarten, the teacher said that the class had never been required to do "Cheers" with milk cartons before. We abide where we are kept, even if the legacy is not exactly what we had in mind.

We have all heard our parents' words coming out of our own mouths. We have all heard our own words coming out of our children's mouths. We only realize that a beloved aunt is abiding in us when we won't allow wooden handled paring knives to sit in the dish pan and someone else is putting them in the dishwasher.

That's one of a myriad of reasons that death hurts so much. These people are abiding in us and yet they are separated from us. When they were alive, they could abide in us and there were no sharp edges. Now that they are separated from us, no matter how warm and loving the memories, there is still that glass shard that slices us open all over again. They endure in us and yet we are cut off from them.

¹ Joan Chittister, *Essential Writings*. Selected by Mary Lou Kowacki and Mary Hembrow Snyder. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 126.

² Thayer's Greek Lexicon for μένω.

That's where Mary is in today's reading from John. She and her sister Martha have lost their brother Lazarus. They are weeping, missing him. All the places inside of them where Lazarus was abiding are sharp edged. Jesus joins them and begins to weep too. They go to the tomb and the stone is rolled away and Lazarus comes out. Clearly this is meant to foreshadow Jesus' own death, but there is an important difference that we may not notice. Lazarus is brought *back* to life, but he has not gone *beyond* death. Lazarus will die once more. Lazarus is not resurrected.

Think about the passage from Revelation: *Death will be no more* (Revelation 21:4). Resurrection means that death has no dominion over you. *The mourning and crying and pain will be no more* (Revelation 21:4). From the passage from Isaiah we read as a call to worship this morning, *The Lord of hosts will destroy ... the shroud that is cast over all peoples ... he will swallow up death forever.* (Isaiah 25:7).

To believe in the resurrection does not only mean that we believe there is something after death. To believe in the resurrection means that we believe that death itself will die. *The holy city, the new Jerusalem, will come down out of heaven from God* (Revelation 21:2) and then death itself is dead. All the separation, all the sharp edges that cut us, that cut the ones we love when we die, all that is dead and gone. We will be whole once more, certain that we will never have to face that kind of loss again.

As we sit here, it is beyond reason to believe that something can possibly dull the cutting edges that our souls catch against when we think of those we love and from whom we are separated by death. They abide in us and they are gone from us and ... forget reason ..., it doesn't *feel* possible that such an aching gap can go away.

In the very beginning of the Gospel of John, in talking about Jesus, it says: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.* (John 1:14 and 16). When it says "lived among us" it means "abided with us". The Word is kept, remains in the places where we are. The Word is in those places which endure, which last, which do not perish because we are in those places too. Jesus abides with us. That's comforting, of course, but maybe it's a bit like Mrs. McKendrick from my grandmother's recipe, deep tenderness but little personal knowledge. Think about all the people who abide in you, all the people whose names we lifted up, aloud or in silence. They abide in us. Just as surely, we abide in them.

Go back to the story about Lazarus. In the period of time we are describing, it was not always easy to distinguish someone barely alive from someone dead. So they watched for three days. On the fourth day, there was no doubt any more.³ And then there was the smell. In the King James version of this story, Mary warns Jesus that Lazarus "stinketh". Lazarus is dead. Lazarus is deader than dead. And Jesus calls his name.⁴ And Lazarus is restored. Because Lazarus abides in Jesus.

When we are dead, when we are deader than dead, Jesus will call our names, because, grace upon grace, we abide in Jesus. We are kept, we remain, we do not leave from Jesus. We endure, we last, we do not perish because we abide in Jesus. Jesus has promised to call our names and

³ Karoline Lewis, "Why preach? To show the intersections of God's word and our world" [2015 NH UCC Clergy Convocation, Biddeford Pool, ME, October 11, 2015].

⁴ Karoline Lewis, "#443 – All Saints Day", *Sermon Brainwave*, Podcast audio. October 24, 2015. https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=676

restore us. When death itself has died, when death itself stinketh, Jesus will call our names and God will wipe every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21:4). Because that's where we abide.