

All Saints Day, November 1, 2009
Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32-44
Rev. Mary Jorgensen

“O Blest Communion”

My dear friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Well, today is an extra special Sunday for me. This is the last time I will step into the pulpit here. As many of you know, I have accepted a position at Sacred Heart Hospital in their administration department. I will be starting there bright and early on Monday, November 9. This will signal a career shift for me, as this position is apart from parish ministry or even chaplaincy.

This pathway has been calling my name for some time now. Why I should be led out of parish ministry after 22 years, I don't know. But I can't ignore the pulling deep within me that has led me to this fork in the road.

Today is All Saints Sunday. This is the day we commemorate all God's saints, both living and dead. Basically, this is the Sunday when we thank God for the gift of the Church. It seems appropriate that this should be my last Sunday with you, as we give thanks for all the saints, both living and dead. We are all God's saints, sanctified in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We entered into his death and new life when we dove into the waters of our baptism. Today we new saint brought into our midst in the baptism of Jacob Carstens at the 10:30 service.

The Church isn't comprised of awesome cathedrals built of stone. And it isn't a denominational headquarters, cranking out themes for stewardship emphases and social

statements on a variety of issues. It isn't even limited by what goes on in church buildings like the one we're in right now. God's church is people. It is all of us, as we go about our daily lives. Wherever we go, there the church is. In our daily living, at our jobs, in schools, in our homes, at the grocery store – in all these places, we are God's saints and ambassadors of God's holy kingdom.

One of the powerful things about God's church is that it isn't bound by any of the definitions of this earthly realm. It isn't bound by either time or place. It isn't bound by life and death. God's church is *all* the people of God, from every time and from every place. It is *all* the saints.

In the Apostles' Creed we confess that we believe in “the communion of saints.” As followers of Christ we share in a blessed community. You have felt this. You can walk into a Christian fellowship anywhere in the world and feel as if you belong with them. You don't even have to speak the same language! Two summers ago our youth worshiped with fellow Lutherans in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The hymns were in Spanish. The sermon was in Spanish. The conversation among members was thoroughly Spanish. But they made us feel at home! Later that week we gathered with a Roman Catholic fellowship at a retreat center which we called “The Holy Place.” Once again, even across denominational lines we felt right at home.

This is the blessed communion we share as a community in Christ. It's a feeling of

family. Although we're not necessarily related by blood, we are sisters and brothers in Christ.

Our Lord himself experienced this family beyond blood. Surely he felt it with his disciples. And he also shared that sense of kinship with his dear friends, Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Today we hear the story concerning the untimely death of Lazarus. Jesus purposely waits four days, until Lazarus is good and dead, before he shows up in Bethany.

This is a poignant text to hear read on All Saints' Sunday. Lazarus is like a brother to Jesus. He has died, and his body is cold in the grave. Jesus comes at last. He finds Martha and Mary grieving for their lost brother. They are surrounded by the company of caring friends. They take Jesus to the grave side, and he, too is overcome with grief. He begins to weep.

But the story doesn't end there. It doesn't end at the grave with tears of grief. It ends in resurrection and tears of joy. Jesus directs them to roll away the stone in front of the grave. And then he commands Lazarus to step out of the tomb. He steps forth from his tomb and into new life.

In this story we see the hope of new life in Christ. The one who commanded Lazarus to rise has also defeated death by stepping out of his very own tomb. Death has lost, and Christ has won. It's a victory bigger than anything Lambeau Field will ever see. When he emerged from the grave he secured our future and our hope and our fellowship divine.

In calling Lazarus from the tomb we see Christ's authority to call us all into new life. As we remember today those who have died in Christ, we know that it doesn't stop there.

They have not only *died* in Christ. They have also been *raised* in Christ. We light these candles today to commemorate them. And these candles remind us of the candles which are lit at baptism. They signify that the light of Christ shines in them. And Jesus Christ is the light of the world. He is the light which no darkness has overcome. This is the light they have in him. And nothing, not even death, can snuff it out!

Little Jacob Carstens receives that light today. It is an eternal light. It illumines our way through this life, and it never goes out. It shines ever, because our Lord lives.

We have been adopted into the body of Christ, into what we call the communion of saints. This is our family of God. Today we celebrate all saints. And we are richer for all the saints.

Like any family, the stories of all these saints and the relationships we have with them shape who we are. They mold and inform the identities we have developed of ourselves. The impact this holy family of God has on us is so profound that we really can't measure or identify how it has affected us.

I can think of some of the saints in my life. Who would I be without my Grandpa Jorgensen, a man whom I personally don't remember, but who I know got up 20 minutes early every morning—which is *early* when you're a dairy farmer—to read his Bible? Who would I be without Dorothy Hofeling, a boisterous, loving woman in the parish where I grew up? Every Sunday Dorothy would give me a big hug and a warm hello. Or who would I be without Ragnhild Hansen, a 94 year old woman in my first parish? Ragnhild prayed for me every day until she died. And now I'm sure she remembers me still from the company of

saints in light. Who would I be without the support and fellowship and strong witness I have received from you during the two years our paths have intersected?

I thank all of you deeply for the friendship you have extended to me while I have been called as your pastor. I feel honored to have served among you and to be part of the long heritage of Our Savior's Lutheran Church. This congregation's ministry is part of the long string of saints. For over 140 years this congregation has been proclaiming Our Savior's love and serving in his name. We have worked shoulder to shoulder as one in mission. We have sat next to one another in worship, in hope and in song. You have been friends to me, and I hope you have felt my friendship in return. Our time together has been brief, but your impression and witness on me have been deep.

Who would I be without you? Who would I be without this long string of people? How would I be a different person? How have all these saints shaped and blessed me? I don't know, but this much I do know. I would be a poorer person. I would be like parched earth. I would be like a skinny stray cat with nowhere to call home.

Who of God's saints have shaped your life? Do you even know who they all are? What a tremendous gift God has given us in the communion of saints! It is a gift of such magnitude and depth. To measure it would be like trying to count the stars.

This holy family is what we celebrate today. When we were adopted as God's righteous children at our baptism, we didn't just gain a relationship with God alone. The whole communion of saints, both living and departed, were included in the deal. Most of these saints we will not know personally. And yet, it's mysterious how life's

circumstances can connect the saints of one corner of the world with the saints of another.

This communion of saints called the Church connects us together in ways we could never conceive. The prayers we pray on Sunday morning, the sweaters and quilts we send to Lutheran World Relief, the missionaries we support, the conversations we have over a cup of coffee in the lounge, these are the things that knit us inextricably together as the family of God. And the mystery of the communion of saints continues on. How will we all be different because of each other's presence?

We don't yet know. But on All Saints Sunday, we may do well to heed the words of Isaiah:

Enlarge the place of your tent,
stretch your tent curtains wide,
do not hold back;
lengthen your cords,
strengthen your stakes.
For you will spread out to the right
and to the left.

God's saints are too numerous to count. But as we open up our hearts and minds in welcome, we find that our family has grown.