

Nov 4, 2018, Anthon UMC, John 11:32-44, "Banning Death"

by Pastor Sheryl K. Ashley

If you were asked to name someone who was an influential saint in your own life, who would you name...a grandparent, a parent, some Sunday school teacher? Somebody? Anybody? As a Swedish Bishop once insisted, "We need the saints. Saints make it easier to believe in God. Saints come in all shapes and sizes. Some saints may not say a lot but their lives show us they are doing their best to save us.

This week I was reminded of how saint-like a small child can be. Some children on their way home from school surprised me by stopping in at our church a couple of times this week trying to sell me beaded bracelets. When I asked them why, they said, "Our 6th grade class is selling them to save the chimpanzees in Uganda, Africa. The chemicals the farmers are using on their crops is killing them. By 2020 all the chimpanzees there will be dead!" I was kind of taken aback when one child explained the project with such passion, that it made me think how I wished we, the church, would get as caught up in saving souls right here just as these little kids are in saving some Ugandan chimpanzees -- that we would go out on the streets, house to house to share our cause. The children's passion encouraged mine and I bought 2 of those bracelets!

Believe it or not, young or old, we who have a passion for souls are all saints with a little “s,” as Jesus in his passion to save us has purchased us by saving us from our sins and made us right before God. And so, All Saints is one of those seasons of the church when we come together to celebrate and mark the eternal life of the loved ones gone before us who are safe with him. And we celebrate that we, with them, are all still one body in Christ Jesus and that not even death can separate us for God’s word promises that “Love never ends.” Those 3 words, “Love never ends” stretches across the unfathomable distance between heaven and earth with a promise that someday, someday, there will be no distance at all.

In the temporary bad news called death, we try not to dwell on the word “death” but rather we ban death by emphasizing the words, “Eternal Life” because that is how we strive by faith to see our loved ones...alive eternally. Sometimes that is easier than others, and we’d like to ban that great enemy death itself if we could. Jesus says death is the last enemy to be defeated. Don’t we know it!

I recently read a strange article entitled, “Town Bans Death” ...a gripping thought, so I looked into it. It turns out one town tries to ban death but not for the reasons you’d think. There is a town in Norway called Longyearbyen where they did ban death. At least on their island. Longyearbyen, is a

tranquil town in the middle of nowhere and is so remote that residents are not allowed to die there.

This may sound like a Halloween story but dying has been banned on the island since 1950, when it was discovered that bodies in the local cemetery were not decomposing because of the chilly temperatures. “Dust to dust, ashes to ashes” does not work there. The reason is that the island’s climate is so arctic that in the 2000s, scientists tested the bodies buried there who had succumbed to the 1917 influenza virus—and to their amazement, retrieved live samples of the virus....living samples. Like sin; germs or viruses have a long shelf life and live on, waiting for a chance to attack us just when we feel safe. Residents there had been living among the deadly virus for decades, without even realizing it.

The cemetery no longer takes any new inhabitants because of fears disease will spread throughout the island. Instead, terminally ill residents have to be shipped to the mainland to prepare for death. You can move dying to another place, but only God can stop death or change it to eternal life, transporting us to a better place we call heaven, our true mainland.

On this, our All-Saint’s Sunday, we, saints and sinners all rolled into one human creation, come remembering those gone before us, to that better

place. We come admitting that while **we** can't ban death, though Jesus Christ God has.

In the book of Revelation, we read, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See I am making all things new." That sounds like death is banned to me!

In this world which seems to grow more hopeless every day, God says, it will be so! Those sad and angry tears we shed today will be wiped away and their reason forgotten. All the thoughts that haunt us awakening us in the dark of the night will vanish; hunger, disease, war and violence will be gone. There's a new world waiting.

We are promised there will be no more tears in heaven, for it is there, death is truly banned so there will be no need for tears. However, I believe the ability to shed tears on this earth is a gift of God. Tears here are our body's way of releasing pain, and also expressing joy that is too big to contain...or we might explode inside.

You can bet at Lazarus' death there were tears to spare. He was a well loved and important man in his culture.

The Jewish people and people all around the world today are weeping for the Pittsburg Jewish community which was stricken over a week ago by a mad gunman who killed 11 of their people worshiping in a synagogue, as well as wounding 4 others. Shooter Robert Bowers, who is pleading innocent, was treated by a Jewish doctor who said, "My job is not to judge him. My job is to treat him." I wrote a Jewish Rabbi friend of mine to tell him our church was praying about the tragic loss. He sends his thanks to us and said that The Pittsburg attack is really an attack on all people of all faiths because we never know who will be next in the mind of a deranged person." The world could take a lesson from the response of those of the Jewish faith who have faced prejudice and death more than any other culture.

Our Jewish Jesus, who adopted us into his family, forever carries the physical scars in his body of the crucifixion that defeated death and dying. His job was to defeat death and earn our eternity and despite the cost he did it. He made it possible that death here is only a transition. Yet Jesus must shed tears for people who die unjustly and far too young. He must shed even tears for those who lose their minds and destroy their lives

indulging in hatred of others and who lash out to destroy those who think differently from them, but who are, in reality, brothers and sisters of one Father. This world is a testing ground for us to learn to ban hatred and learn forgiveness. How are you doing? Jesus was a good Jewish boy who lived that belief to the end and forgave the unforgiveable when he could have struck them and us all dead when we turn against one another and seek to do harm. But Jesus came to ban death and teach us we couldn't have it both ways...revenge and forgiveness doesn't have the space to live in the same mind. It is the choice of every one of us to pick the road we will travel. May we never harm others who disagree with our beliefs in religion or in politics or whatever sets us off, seeking to have our own way. By the way, won't it be good to have the elections over with??? Even if our choice doesn't win? Won't it be good when the UMC decides what to do with the social issues on human sexuality we are at odds about? What if we don't win on that one? Will we riot in the streets and hate our neighbor or will we ban hatred which leads to death? In many ways banning these potential deaths are up to us.

In our scripture today, Jesus was on his way to Lazarus' tomb to defeat death.

When Jesus finally got to the home of Martha and Mary we read that Jesus saw the sisters and the professional mourners weeping at the untimely death of their brother, Lazarus. Jesus could have saved him, healed him, but he did not and in their minds, now all was lost. At that, Jesus began to weep at their unbelief.

If there is any comfort in death and in our tears, it is that God has made our loved ones new. They now live in perfection and glory. That is the good news of the Gospel. Jesus has defeated our reason for tears. He has died our death for us. He has risen to new life so that we who believe can also follow in that same path for eternity.

. It's a great thing to enter into eternal life after a good long life on this earth. Even after a good long life on this earth, we tire of all the pain and tears, mourning, and death of loved ones. We desire to be reunited with those loved ones who have gone before us. This death can be a welcome thing for some, and as much as we miss our friends, our father or mother or grandparent, our spouse, our child; in our heart of hearts we are grieving not for them, but for ourselves and our own loss. And that's ok and normal because it's human to miss the love they gave us.

That grief for an unfulfilled life is one no one should have to bear, but bear it many do. Jesus lost his good friend, Lazarus out of time. Jesus

wept over death and the grief of others, even though he has the power to resurrect Lazarus physically for a time. There may be no tears in heaven, but I believe God still joins us here to weep with those who weep over the loss of loved ones, young or old, God feels our pain. We do not bear it alone. Our faith tells us that God has our loved one in his safe care, and that their lives are fulfilled in the glories of heaven. If only we had the faith to believe that. But we are Martha and we are Mary, and even as Jesus' friends, we question, "Why God, did you not save my loved one, when you could have, you could have." And Jesus weeps again at our unbelief that God is in charge of the eternal outcome. Jesus could resurrect us all time and time again to this veil of tears, even when we are old and all used up. God does not choose that path. God chose the path of Jesus being birthed in a flesh and blood body just like ours, experiencing life and death, only with the end result being a physical resurrection, so that we could know that our faith in him will resurrect us also.

It is in that resurrection faith we come today to be claimed as part of the eternal Body of Saints. It is in that resurrection faith that we receive the body and blood of Christ in Communion as a sign of the power, of entering into his death and resurrection, along with the Body of Saints with all the others who claim the same faith.

As we light the candles celebrating the life of our loved ones this day, let us bless them on their way with the faith that we and they are free and alive in God's care, where death is banned and there are no more tears.