

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
November 7, 2021 All Saints/Year B
Texts – Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Imagine for a moment a large, extended family gathered around a holiday table covered with a wide assortment of food for a great feast. It's Thanksgiving or Christmas or Easter. The year is somewhere around 1967, and the people gathered are members of my extended family. But it could be any year and any extended family. It could be your family.

Just as there is a wide assortment of food on the table, so too there is a wide assortment of people around the table. A five-foot-tall grandmother with an eighth-grade education whose soft flesh enfolds you as she hugs you in greeting. An uncle who in one moment is filled with laughter and is the life of the party, and who in the next moment has lost his temper over some mundane comment and has stormed out slamming the door behind him. Older teenaged siblings preoccupied with their most recent breakup. Younger cousins, some toddlers, crawling under the table giggling as they annoyingly knock into adult legs. A grandfather sitting in a cushioned chair in the adjacent living room, head back and eyes closed as he sleeps off his daily drunkenness. That's a snapshot of my extended family of over half a century ago. What about your extended family? What does it look like, then and now?

My guess is that it's not perfect – maybe far from it. I'm not even sure what family perfection would look like. Even June and Ward Cleaver of 1950's television fame never had the nerve to showcase their extended family. Who knows what fascinating characters might have shown up to their holiday table to offend everyone's 1950's white suburban sensibilities: quirky grandparents, pot-smoking cousins, an aunt who caused a lot of whispers because she brought her long-time "roommate" with her, and an uncle who persistently tried to get June alone in the kitchen. Perhaps that's an episode still begging to be made.

Today we are celebrating the Feast of All Saints, one of the Principal Feasts of the year for Christians. My appreciation for this day has deepened over the years, precisely because it challenges us as people of God to shed our pious images of perfection. Now, that might not be obvious at first sight, given all this talk today about the righteous and holy ones of God. Most of us have been taught to think of those saints, those holy ones, as somehow closer to perfection than other people – certainly closer to perfection than I am. But I think that warps the deeper intention of this day, and it throws us off course. Hear me out.

Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, are apparently close friends of Jesus. They have spent time together. The siblings likely have offered hospitality to Jesus on any number of occasions. While they may not literally be relatives of Jesus, they are together part of the same extended family. They clearly love each other.

We know the story. Lazarus becomes ill, and Jesus refuses to visit, which understandably angers the two sisters. When Jesus finally shows up only after Lazarus's death, each of the sisters in turn cries out to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." How typically human is that? In the midst of inconsolable grief and sorrow, they lash out at the Holy One. "You! You could have prevented this, but instead you allowed it to happen. You willingly let our brother to die. What kind of Son of God do you pretend to be?" Jesus himself finally breaks down in tears as he experiences his own grief at the death of his friend.

But suddenly the story takes a turn. Jesus, followed by the sisters and the mourning villagers, walks to the tomb where Lazarus's corpse has been lying for three days. Jesus commands that someone roll away the stone from the entrance of the tomb. There's an instant protest, because everyone knows that Lazarus had already been dead for a few days, and this would not be a pleasant experience. And this is where it's always fun to show sixth-grade boys the King James Version. Martha calls out in good Elizabethan fashion: "But Lord, he stinketh!"

Lazarus's odor obviously is not Jesus' main concern. Human stinkiness, or if you like, human dysfunction or imperfection, may be our obsession, but it's not Jesus' main concern. In fact, you might have noticed that Jesus tends to spend most of his time with precisely the stinkiest lot, those everyone else shuns.

So Jesus offers a prayer, walks toward the open tomb and cries, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man, still bound in burial cloths, walks out into the daylight to the astonishment of everyone present.

Now, there's been endless interpretation of this passage that usually takes a predictable tack. The gospel writer up to this point has been unfolding a series of signs that point to who Jesus is, the revealed Word of God. This is the seventh and last of those signs, clearly the most impressive. Jesus demonstrates power over death itself showing that he and the Father indeed are one.

That's fine as far it goes. I have no argument. But I think there's another layer of meaning here that connects up with today's celebration of All Saints. The story ends with what for me at least are some of the most powerful words of scripture. After Lazarus has emerged from the tomb, Jesus lays a critical command on the gathered community, the extended family, if you will. He says, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Why is that important? Because while we tend to focus so much on the image of Jesus calling the dead man out of the tomb, we miss the fact that the miracle is not complete until the community does the unbinding, carries out the act of freedom. Without that, Lazarus is merely a Halloween mummy walking blindly into the world.

Saints are no more perfect than you or I. They are simply people called out, often in their own metaphorical, or maybe even literal, stinkiness. This is what holy means: it's to be called out, set apart, not to conform to some unattainable image of perfection, but to walk together with God in companionship with one another; and, as a community, to complete God's gift to the world of freedom, liberation, and sight. The saints are those called to unbind those wrapped up in death, and let them go free.

The Great Cloud of Witnesses is our extended family. Imagine how annoying they are sitting around a Thanksgiving table: Paul telling the women to mind their talk and cover their heads; Miriam dancing in the corner banging her tambourine; Amos offending democrats and republicans alike for refusing to address the things that truly matter; Peter standing around the warmth of the fireplace diminished in his collapsed integrity; Augustine amusing the teenagers with stories of his own wayward youth sowing his wild oats.

This is our family, the watchers and the holy ones. Quite an assortment, isn't it? This is the household of God. This is the Great Cloud of Witnesses, the saints of God. As we will sing in the few minutes, "The saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one, too."