

1 November 2015 (All Saints' Day)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
"Stewards of New Life"
John 11:32-44

It has been about twenty-five years since I was involved in pastoral care with AIDS patients. Those were the early years of the pandemic before today's multiple medications were available, and we could do little but watch young people die, doing our best to comfort and minister to them. And yet, that ministry was the most enriching and life giving I have ever known. It may seem strange that I should describe ministry with the dying as life giving, but it was. What made it so was the way the gift of Christ's love that I had to offer met the yearning that the dying had for eternal life. One young woman named Emily was so courageous in her fight against AIDS, and she became an inspiration to those of us who provided counseling, rides to the doctor, food, and care for her daughter. Her daughter was born HIV positive and died at the age of four. Emily was grief stricken when her daughter died, even as her own health declined. One day when I went over to see her, she told me as soon as I walked in that she knew she had only a few days to live. And she said, "Read me that passage in the Bible—you know, the one that describes heaven, and there will be no more tears." Turning to Revelation, I read the passage we heard this morning. She had me read it again, and again. And the next day, she died.

I can still remember sitting across from Emily at her kitchen table as she asked me to read Revelation 21 again, and again, and again. The vision of the new heaven and the new earth was so compelling for her, she could see it and she yearned to be there, surrounded by God's unending presence in a place of joy and life. The reason I share that story is to remind you of the message of new life, of which we are stewards. Christ has entrusted us with the message of new life to give to those who are yearning for it. And if you and I don't offer it, or if we don't understand what it is, or if we are somehow blind and deaf to those who seek it, then the message of new life can't reach those who want to hear about that vision of the new heaven and the new earth, again, and again, and again. We might think that no one really wants to hear the good news of the Gospel, or that we have to fight or manipulate people to get them to listen. But it has been my experience that all kinds of people feel as though they are dying, whether physically or spiritually, and that they are crying out for good news that endures, and that offers the hope of eternal life.

As we gather here this morning, we should remember that at some point in our lives, someone offered to us the message of new life, and that we received it as good news, and that it changed us forever. All Saints' Day is when the church remembers the saints who have gone before, the saints who lived as stewards of new life because they saw themselves as caretakers and guardians of a message that was too important not to share, and too significant not to support. These saints may have been our parents, or they may have taught Sunday School, or they may have been people who crossed our path briefly yet powerfully. However that message came to us, and whoever conveyed it, it was rooted in the same resurrection power described by John in his Gospel account of

Jesus calling Lazarus from the grave. But more than an ancient historical event, that resurrection power is timeless: it is as immediate to us as it was to every generation of saints that has gone before. It never gets old, it never weakens, and it never loses its relevance.

As Jesus entered Bethany and encountered an entire village in mourning, he was also confronted by Lazarus's accusing sister, Martha. In her own way, Martha is crying out for good news, for some relief from the unbearable grief she feels over her brother's death, which she is convinced would not have happened if Jesus had arrived sooner—as she is quick to point out. I have always found this account intriguing. Has Martha assumed that Jesus has only one way of working? Is she confining him to one set of possibilities that she has already determined? Of course she is. Martha responds the way we all do, out of the only set of experiences we know. And at first, we are puzzled as to why Jesus didn't rush to Bethany as soon as he heard the news of Lazarus's condition, or why he seems to be caught off guard by Lazarus's death. Certainly he is grief stricken when he hears the news, but then he asks Martha to open the tomb, as though his own grief has opened up a new vision of what is possible by the power of God. And he interprets to her his desire to open the tomb as an expectant moment to witness the glory of God. When Jesus calls forth Lazarus, he is effectively calling to everyone who believes it is too late and that life has passed them by. The message of new life of which the church is a steward is that call. It draws the dying from death to new life.

In the church's present life together, we stand as recipients of a legacy from the saints who have gone before. We have taken the legacy handed down to us, a legacy that has the previous generation's fingerprints all over it, and we have made it our own, adding our fingerprints to Christ's message of hope and new life. But we are not the end of the story. The legacy of the saints does not stop with us. At some point we are obligated to hand the message of new life, of which we are stewards, to the next generation. They, in turn, are called to handle it and get their fingerprints all over it so that they can hand it down to their children, and so on, and so on. If we are to be faithful stewards, the mission and ministry of this church is our responsibility to sustain for generations to come. How are we to fulfill that sacred trust? How will we ensure that Christ's transforming message will give new life to those who yearn for it in a suffering, broken world?

One thing we know for certain about the church's legacy is that its core power does not derive from us. That resurrection power comes from Christ alone, for Christ alone is head of the church. But Christ's power must speak through our voices, go out into the world through our feet, and serve the world through our hands. You may not see yourself as one of the saints, but you are, every time you allow Christ to speak, walk, and touch through you. There are people dying all around us, and I don't just mean that they are reaching their end of days in this life. Rather, they feel as though it is too late for them, that they have effectively squandered their chances, and that they have run out of hope. They want to grasp hold of that new heaven and new earth that God has promised, but they are not sure whether anyone really believes that anymore, or they don't see any evidence that God is still actively working to bring life out of death. But that's where

you and I come in. As stewards of new life, we are part of the band of saints who has supported us, and whom we support as the next generation of saints. That legacy, that message, is why we are a church with a mission, a ministry, and a mandate to love the world as Christ loves the world. What message of new life are we modeling and giving to those who will follow us?



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