

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 5, 2006

Sermon Text: John 11:28-44

I've been struggling with this text for two weeks. How to tie All Saints Sunday together with the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and then I began to think, you know, we're also conflicted with the word "saint" itself. In the Roman Catholic Church, to become an official saint, first of all, you have to be dead for some time. In a lot of United Methodist churches, people become saints the moment they die. We begin to speak only about the good and not about the struggles, but struggles are real. Doubts are real, and all of us have them. Being dead is not a Scriptural requirement for sainthood nor is being perfect.

We are all called to be living saints. Saints are all faithful Christians, all who rejoice in the knowledge that they need it and now have new life in Jesus Christ. All believers are called to be saints in this way, but there is something in us that does not want to grow and change, something in us that does not like a saint or even the possibility of a new and holy life. Holy and righteous life shines forth the light of God in such a way that convicts us and shows us where we need to change and that we sometimes find offensive.

A man was sitting in a bar, downing one drink after another, when the man on the barstool next to him asked, "What's wrong?" He said, "Well, I'm drinking to the memory of my wife. She was a saint on earth. She went to church three times a week. She spent her days quoting Scripture, singing hymns and songs, and all evening she invited people over and shared her faith. Had Bible studies in our living room." The second man said, "She sounds perfect! How did such a pious woman come to die so young?" Staring at the bar, the man replied, "I strangled her!"

Something in us does not like the presence of the holiness of other people, the righteousness of God revealing in us the darkness that needs changing. The cross reveals how outraged our world is by true holiness. Holiness convicts of the need for change. In that conviction, we have two choices: to worship and give ourselves to God and to new life or to cast God out and stay the same.

A saint is someone odd and someone different, someone who because of how they love God and love others is worth imitating. A saint is someone who makes it easier to believe in God. I think that's probably the best definition. A saint is someone who makes it easier to believe there is a God, and a God who is active in people's lives, and a God who can change and grow people in a Christ-like way over a lifetime. Something inside of people like this shows forth light and life.

I had an MRI on my shoulder last week, and you know, it's amazing the detail! I looked at the films, and I couldn't really make out much except that it can see very clearly through my skin and through my muscle and even through my bones. It can see into me. Jesus can see into our hearts, and see the dead things there, and bring them to new life. I believe that is the major point of our Gospel reading today. Jesus asked Martha, "Do you believe in the Resurrection?" I think she said with a sigh, "Yes, Lord, I believe in the Resurrection eventually, but it's a long way off. Too late for my brother, Lazarus." Jesus

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 5, 2006

said I am, I am currently, I am, I am presently, I am, I am in this moment the Resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me even though they die yet shall they live, and no one who lives and believes in me shall ever die. Do you believe this Martha? This is where that quote we begin almost every memorial service with comes from. It seems too much for Martha and maybe too much for us. She backed up to what she can fathom, and she says Lord, I believe, yeah, I believe you're the Messiah, I believe you're the Son of God, the one who's coming into the world, but that's all future. What can possibly change now?

All through the Bible, God is pictured as one who creates and is continually creating. Behold I make all things new says God in the Word. God can still speak and change what is. God is not finished ever. When Jesus said, “Martha, I am the Resurrection and the life,” He was saying there are no circumstances I cannot change. He is saying, sinner, it's never too late to begin the road to saint.

I'm glad we had those Gospel songs, those old spirituals sung today. Sinner, it's never too late to come home. God's Resurrection power is always working, always moving, popping up in unexpected ways. We don't have to be dead inside. Large parts of our soul, large parts that we just accepted will always be dead and dead weight in bitterness and hurt and grief and guilt and pain, we don't have to accept that because of God's Resurrection power.

You know, the polls are big in the news these days. The polls say that fewer people believe in God each year. They also say that fewer and fewer people believe in the political process or even politicians each year, and neither do we believe that we have the power to change anything in the world so big and so out of control so what is left? This attitude is on college campuses in a big way. I read a college newspaper offered a prize to the person who submitted the best definition of life, and these are two of the definitions that came in. Life is a joke that isn't funny. Life is a jail sentence we get for the crime of being born. Life is a disease for which there is only one cure – death. What a cheery place college campuses are!

It seems we are becoming a people, which believes the future is dead and beyond hope. We all need some sort of resurrection; some power outside of ourselves to change and to grow and platitudes won't do that. Statements of future faith such as Martha's won't do that. Only God's power in the present moment to recreate, to resurrect is enough to give us hope. Only saints who live out that hope and have shown that sort of change in their lives over a lifetime and shine forth that light of new life can convince others that God still has the power to change things. God's resurrection power is for today, not just for after we die.

Think of the relationships you have or have had. A good friend of mine was telling me, he's got a single child, he's got only one child at home, and he's now a teenager, and they have been so close! They have been Boy Scouts together. They've done computers and ride bicycles and done hikes and all this sort of thing, but now his son is embarrassed to

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 5, 2006

be seen with him. He was telling me this on the phone, so upset. His child actually acts like he hates him sometimes. The reason he thinks that is because the child tells him, “I hate you!” sometimes. This is the first time he’s ever had a teenager. I told him, “This too shall pass.” It’s normal. Relationships, parent, child, spouse, spouse, brother sister, our relationships go through periods of death and rebirth, and isn’t it painful, but beautiful when you get to the other side?

God’s Resurrection power is for us today, not just for after we die. Some of us have grown beyond addictions, grown beyond grief, grown beyond old wounds, grown beyond bitterness, and isn’t it painful, but beautiful when you get to the other side, to know that God’s resurrection is not just for after we die, but for today and for now.

Eugene O’Neill wrote a play about this Gospel episode. It’s entitled “Lazarus Laughs.” The play begins with Lazarus being raised from the dead, and people have gathered at his home in Bethany. They thought it was going to be a funeral, but instead he’s raised from the dead and they’re rejoicing. Then comes the question that you know you would ask him, “What was it like during the four days that you were dead? What was it like in the life beyond?” In the midst of it all, Lazarus’s father proposes a toast, “To my son, Lazarus, whom the blessed miracle has brought back from death!” Hearing this Lazarus says, “No.” In the play, he says, “No, there is no death.” The people holding their wine goblets in midair echo his words as a question, “There is no death?” Lazarus laughs. He says, “Happily there is only life. What happened was I heard in my heart the heart of Jesus laughing. I heard in my heart the heart of Jesus saying there is only eternal life. Laugh! Laugh with me! Fear is no more.”

Robert Browning wrote a poem about Lazarus’s resurrection. Robert Browning tells us that when Lazarus returned to life, he was strangely different. The people around him were anxious about so many little things that seemed to be of no concern to Lazarus anymore. On the other hand, many things that deeply concerned Lazarus did not seem to really matter to all the people around him. The point of the poem is that the resurrected Lazarus now has seen life in a whole new perspective. His vision was more God-centered and all else in his life fell into place.

Being God-centered changes us, and helps those around us who see the change believe in God, and that is what sainthood is about.

Legend has it that a missionary lost at sea was by chance washed up on the edge of a remote native village. Half dead from starvation, exposure and seawater, he was found by the villagers, and they nursed him back to health, subsequently, this missionary lived among the people for 20 years. Now, during that time, he didn’t teach them any songs. He didn’t preach any sermons. He didn’t make any personal claim of faith, but when the people were sick, he attended them, sitting long into the night. When the people were hungry, he gave them food. When the people were lonely, he was the source of company, a source of light and love. He took the side of those who were wronged in the village. He identified with the weak and the outcast. After 20 years, some other fellow

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, November 5, 2006

missionaries came to that island by sea, and they began talking to the people right off the bat about this man named Jesus. After hearing about Jesus, the natives insisted, oh yes, we know Jesus; he has lived among us for 20 years! They took the missionaries to meet this man, and they found their long lost, fellow missionary whom they had thought dead. He had lived his faith before them.

Everyone, everyone who encounters Jesus, who comes to believe in Him, and to receive some new life that grows and becomes even more new life, as we become new people, therefore, believe in Him when He says, “I am the Resurrection and the light. Those who believe in me even though they die will live.” It is not just a promise for after we die. It is new life now. If you are anxious about many things to the point where spiritually and emotionally you have one foot in the grave, remember tomorrow belongs to God, and consequently you can look forward to an eternal future through the eyes of faith, but also, we can look forward to the moment and the power of God to grow us wherever we are. Resurrection faith admits of two eternally enduring relationships just as Jesus preached throughout His ministry. Love of God and love of neighbor. These last forever through faith in Christ.

Jesus’ prescription, if you want a foretaste of God’s eternal life, if you want a foretaste of God’s eternal love, then love God and love each other. Live out your love in self-giving and forgiving ways and in service to one another. Trust God. Love God and love neighbor, the neighbor whom God also loves just as He loves you. Know that acts of love echoed from God’s heart through you to others are more real and more lasting than all the chaos in the world. If you want to change the world as a saint of God then love God and love your neighbor just as you believe God loves your neighbor. If you believe this, then pray to God for the power to live it. It is never too late to step on the road to sainthood. Amen.