

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard  
“The Legacy of the Saints”  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood  
Sunday, November 1, 2020

**Psalm 34**

*I will bless the LORD at all times;*

*God’s praise shall continually be in my mouth.*

*My soul makes its boast in the LORD;*

*let the humble hear and be glad.*

*O magnify the LORD with me,*

*and let us exalt God’s name together.*

*I sought the LORD, and God answered me,*

*and delivered me from all my fears.*

*Look to the Lord, and be radiant;*

*so your faces shall never be ashamed.*

*This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,*

*and was saved from every trouble.*

*The angel of the LORD encamps*

*around those who fear God, and delivers them.*

*O taste and see that the LORD is good;*

*happy are those who take refuge in him.*

*Depart from evil, and do good;*

*seek peace, and pursue it.*

*The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,*

*and his ears are open to their cry.*

*When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,*

*and rescues them from all their troubles.*

*The LORD is near to the broken-hearted,*

*and saves the crushed in spirit.*

*The LORD redeems the life of his servants;*

*none of those who take refuge in God will be condemned.*

## **Revelation 21, 22**

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*'See, the home of God is among mortals.*

*God will dwell with them;*

*they will be his peoples,*

*and God will be with them;*

*God 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.'*

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; and there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

*The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'*

*And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'*

*And let everyone who is thirsty come.*

*Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift.*

*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.*

Will you pray with me? Holy and most gracious God, be with us now as we hear your word and are reminded of your light and love. These things we ask in the name of your son. Amen.

I'm going to adjust this. Each year, the presbytery asks us to let them know of those elders who have died during the past year. And at one particular presbytery meeting each year, the elders are listed in the minutes of the meeting in a section called the necrology. The same thing is done at general assembly with regard to the clergy members who have died since the prior general assembly meeting. And I think it's one of the ways in which we remember the saints of the church, acknowledging the gifts they had shared and their contribution to the life of the church. And in this congregation a number of years ago, we began this ritual of remembering as well, remembering members who have gone on to be with God in the last year. And then more recently, we decided we should also add the names of loved

ones that you, our members, have lost in the past year that we are aware of. The remembering of the saints, though, is somewhat new in our tradition.

I read up on some of the history and learned that this is one of the things that during the Reformation, was not carried on by some denominations, that parts of the Roman church traditions were not continued. Remembering the saints along with ashes on Ash Wednesday and a more in-depth observation of advent were not focused on. But in recent years, it's been more meaningful for us to reclaim some of those traditions so that we can be more aware of the rhythm of the church here. But I think in the case of All Saints Day, part of the reason it was not included was because our reform tradition understands the term, saints, differently than some others. In other denominations, the saints are understood as those who have special status and roles recognized for miracles or martyrdom. But for Presbyterians, the saints are simply and powerfully those of the faith who have died and gone on to be with God. There was a pastor named Henry Daniels who wrote about this issue and said, "It wasn't until 1932 that we restored it to our book of common worship." And he said, "It's important for us to do this because it reminds us of the bond between those in heaven, the church triumphant, and the living here on Earth, and a recognition of Christ's victory over death for us all." I think reclaiming this day gives us a chance to remember and recognize the passing of people and the passing of time. It recognizes the reality of our losses, and it's another chance for us to honor the roles and contributions for these people who were a part of the life of this congregation or a part of the lives of those we care about us-- who we care about in our church community, who have lost someone. Many of us remember those who taught us about the faith who spoke of faith bringing light and love into our lives. The Sunday school teachers or choir directors or mentors who shaped us with their wisdom and their witness. For some of us today, the grief is very fresh and new. It's a time of grieving and sorrow. And I think the readings this morning touch on this.

Psalm 34 reminds us that God is aware of the losses of our lives, the difficulties, the times when our hearts ache and we feel brokenhearted. It reminds us with the verse about the angel, the messenger of the Lord that, in times of loss and grief, we're not alone.

Revelation speaks to us of hope and the promises of God about the life to come. They are promises of things we cannot fully know. And the writer speaks of words with powerful imagery. "God will dwell with them. They will be God's people and God will be with them. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. For the old order of things has passed away." And then from Chapter 22, "There will be no more night. They will not leave the light of a lamp or the light of the sun. For the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever." I think their words attempting to describe what we cannot fully grasp, yet we are invited to trust in, and the time to come; a time of peace where there is no pain, a promise offered in hope.

And so this day, though our grief may still be with us, we do celebrate the gift of the lives we have loved and lost here on Earth. And we give thanks for the imprint they left on our lives and the lives of this congregation. For indeed, it is something to ponder on that, the only reason we are all gathered here today, is because of those who came before us; from the early ones who founded this congregation, and all those who followed over the years, sharing their commitment to the church and serving others. They held fast to the faith. They shared their faith. They were committed to this congregation here and in other places. Their legacy lives on through their work, by their service, by those who followed them. Their legacy has shaped us and encouraged us and reminded us that we are connected to those who come before us. Perhaps nowhere does that become more visible, than when we ordain those who serve

as pastors or deacons or elders. The laying on of hands is a tradition and connection that weaves throughout the centuries from the disciples who were commissioned by Jesus.

There are times too, when I close my eyes and see in my own mind's eye, the saints of this church; where they sat, who they sat with, how they loved and served this congregation; members of the choir who have gone to be with God. And it's a poignant moment of gratitude and Thanksgiving. I'm moved by remembering all those who labored and now rest, for the difference they made in our lives, and in the life of this congregation.

So we come this day to give thanks and remember, to recognize that those who have come before us are part of the Communion of Saints that we call upon and remember each time we come to Communion. And we call out those who are part of the church, Triumphant. And today we will say their names with the lighting of candles and remember the Saints when we celebrate the Sacrament.

In closing, I would share a story from the movie called *Places in the Heart* that starred Sally Fields. It is a scene I have shared before. But on this day especially, it's a powerful image worth remembering. The movie is not an easy story. It's one of loss and change and death and racism during the time of the Depression. Sally Fields plays the mother who loses her husband in an accidental death that stirs up violence and destructive revenge in the community. But as the story unfolds, it also brings together a most unlikely group of people to create a sense of family and community. The end of the movie brings us to an awareness of what it means to speak of the saints and of reconciliation. For the closing scene is in a church. The pews are filled with the congregation about to receive Communion. And as we look among the congregation as they take the elements, we suddenly realize that some people, surprisingly, are there, those living and dead, or those who had left for another place. Together the congregation sings the songs of the faithful, and with Thanksgiving, share the Sacrament around a table in a powerful image of hope. They remind us that our lives have been shaped by those who were no longer with us, that we are connected to one another in this moment because of those who have come before us. They remind us that faith is passed on as a legacy that is shared and strengthened by the love we share and have shared, every time the life of Jesus is remembered, and we are nourished at the table. So, thanks be to God for the gift of this sacrament, a sacrament offered and shaped by God's son that reminds us each time we share in this meal together, we are both in this moment, while being connected to the past and planting seeds for the future. Let us give thanks for the Saints and the gift of their lives that ties us together in hope and in love. Amen.