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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Colorado Springs, Colorado
October 30, 2016 All Saints Sunday
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Say It With Psalms 5. Shall Laud

Psalm 145:1-5, 13-19 NRSV I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. 2Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. 3Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable. 4One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. 5On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.... 13Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. 14The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. 15The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. 16You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing. 17The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. 18The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. 19He fulfills the desire of all who reverence him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.

The Psalmist writes: *“One generation shall laud your works to another.”* Shall laud. “Laud.” It’s almost an archaic word, isn’t it? We don’t tend to use it very much in ordinary conversation: “I laud you for this excellent repast that you have supplied me” sounds more like something out of Monty Python than modern English where we’d probably say instead something like “Great dinner!” There is a hymn we sing sometimes on Palm Sunday or in Advent called “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” “Laud” comes from old Norse, English, and French words that each mean “to praise.” One of the regular prayer times at Roman Catholic monasteries and retreat centers is called “Lauds,” and those prayers, as you might expect, focus on praises to God. In the early 19th century, a medicine was developed from opium that its creator named “laudanum” because its effects as a cough suppressant and to stop diarrhea were worthy of praise indeed in a time when dysentery and the flu and croup in infants regularly killed folks at

rates we now find astonishing when these conditions for us often mean simply a few days' annoyance.

Shall laud. It is a word regularly found in the Psalms and it is part of our Psalm for this morning on this All Saints Sunday when we especially remember and give thanks for those among us who have died in the last year. The Psalm on this day is inviting us to praise God for wondrous works, for our daily sustenance, for lifting us up when we are brought low, for satisfying our desires: "*Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised!*" And yet we must acknowledge this morning that on this day, as we look at and have recited those names in our bulletin who have passed from us, who in some cases have been taken from us much too soon, as each one of us is remembering in our hearts ones we miss so very much, we may find it hard to feel like "lauding," to feel like praising God, to be inclined to sing of our joy. All Saints Sunday is indeed a day that we have proclaimed to be one for praising God, but let's be honest: it may be very hard, it may even feel dishonest, to praise God on this day.

My wife Barbara put me on to a lovely and poignant poem by Mary Oliver called "In Blackwater Woods." I think its ending is apt for All Saints Sunday and the swirl of feelings that may be our companion on this day; listen to her words:

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:

to love what is mortal;

to hold it against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it;

and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

Aren't those lovely and poignant words, indeed? They do seem to so well sum up our human condition, don't they. We are made for love and to be loved, with all the

wonders and the glories that that entails. And those who have been privileged to know a love that has helped make us who we are, a love that we cannot imagine having lived our lives nearly as well without, know indeed that our lives as we know them have depended on that love. And we are grateful. But there's also that bittersweet kicker, isn't there: such loves are indeed mortal. Those whom we love shall die, and those who love us and have had their lives changed for the good by us, also know that bittersweet fact that we too are mortal. Which leads to that third thing that Oliver mentions: "and when the time comes, to let it go, to let it go."

This all may seem like a very depressing picture of what our lives are like. And you may wonder what it is that we are "celebrating" on All Saints Sunday, you may wonder why I have said more than once that this is my favorite Sunday of the year. You may wonder why, in the face of mortality and the inevitability of the earthly loss of even the most magnificent of loves, how we could possibly join the psalmist in proclaiming "On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate." What is "glorious" about the human condition and human love so poignantly summarized by Oliver? It may not feel very glorious to you this morning; it may not feel like a day of celebration.

But, my friends, it is, it is. Why? Well, first of all, consider something very wise and very true that the late, great Disciples preacher Fred Craddock once said when he remarked that every single day of his life he prayed this prayer: Gracious God, I am grateful for a way of life and a faith that is more important than how I feel about it on

any given day.¹ In other words, Craddock gently but pointedly reminds himself and you and me that our feelings are not necessarily the final arbiter of reality. Yes, today we may feel sad at the thought of those earthly lives now gone from us, but Craddock reminds us that our feeling isn't the whole story. No, the whole story comes from another source, this time the great theologian Bernard Meland who once remarked that the real question for us – in a world of competing powers, where free will is free to muck things up and cause hurt and pain! – how is it possible that there is good? In other words, it's not so much evil and mortality and loss and imperfection that needs to be understood or explained, but the wondrous, unexpected fact that goodness and love and beauty exist and break out where we never would have expected it.

And that, my friends, is why All Saints Sunday is a celebration, and not just a time for renewed mourning and a renewed sense of loss. Oh, make no mistake, the loss is real, and while its edges may become less sharp over time and the wound of our grief scabbed over, the loss itself never goes away, does it? But, as the Apostle Paul says, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Now, you know what that hopeless grieving looks like, don't you? We all have friends and acquaintances who believe that death is the final truth, that there is nothing beyond, that life is simply snuffed out and the chemical elements that make up the human body become one with the earth again. But while that is true, it is not true enough, it is not what we laud and give thanks for this day. For Meland is right: in one sense loss and mortality *should* be all there is, but it is not. And that's the miracle we celebrate: that, again as Paul puts it, there is nothing,

¹There are various forms of this prayer that can be found cited in a variety of sermons and other places.

nothing, nothing in all creation that will ever separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

And I don't know about you, but that makes it far easier for me to be able to do that third thing that Mary Oliver speaks of: to let life go. It is easier because it is earthly life that is let go of, but not God's life. Now, you and I want to know the how of it. We want to know the mechanics of it. And indeed throughout the Bible there are all sorts of speculations about what eternal life with God is like. Those images turn up in prayers, songs, in hymns. Sometimes the writers of the New Testament speak of a resurrected body. Sometimes what is spoken of is an immortal soul. Jesus talks about a house with many rooms which we will eternally inhabit. But the reality is that all of these images are in fact metaphors which cannot be taken literally. Each points to something important, but none is literal. We have no reports, no email, no Snapchats, no Instagrams from heaven confirming what eternal life is like. All we have are our feeble metaphors, and perhaps some rumors from those who have experienced death and been brought back to life, but even they also speak in metaphors of light and peace. And yet all of those metaphors point to a truth which is not metaphorical, even if it may not satisfy our desire to know the mechanics of eternal life, and that truth is this: God can be trusted to be God. Period. God can be trusted to indeed cherish and love every life whether on earth or in the life to come. I want to know exactly how that is the case. But I won't get an answer to that question, the "mechanics" of eternal life will remain a mystery to me.

But that's okay. For there is something far grander to indeed celebrate and give thanks for this day. For it is as the words of our Psalm for the morning puts it of God:

“One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.”
Shall laud. Shall laud. Indeed the most mighty act of God is to be present with us, in all our imperfection, in all our lives’ messiness, in all our hurt and struggle, all our joy and triumphs. And then to promise us that those lives are not simply of a moment, that we are not simply our chemical constituents, and that always and ever we shall know a love that will not let us go.

There are indeed many images, many metaphors, for this truth, this good news, to be found in the Bible. And poets and songwriters and hymn writers have offered their own affirmations. One of them is that beautiful hymn that has become beloved in the few short years since it was written, “In the Bulb There Is A Flower.” Listen to its image for what eternal life with God is like: *[Kim begins playing the hymn softly underneath]*

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree....

From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

Will you stand and sing it with me? It’s in your hymnal, No. 638