All Saints’ 2024 ~ Live God’s Love

All Saints’ ~ Holy Baptism ~ 150th Anniversary ~ Anniversary Campaign ~ Election Eve

November 3, 2024 ~ John 11:32-44 ~ The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin ~ St. Columba’s Church

Dear Ones, I have good news. The time is come for us to once again receive God’s gift, heed God’s call, commit ourselves to Live God’s Love. We are now, already, and forever living in God’s love. But sometimes we lose our way. Today is a great day in the life of St. Columba’s. I have many strands to weave together in this sermon – with one common thread, a refrain: that, we live God’s love. Will you help me see that love at work and at play in our lives?

These are challenging days. A deep undercurrent of anxiety and fear. It all feels hard, divisive, distrustful, as at the brink of a perilous precipice. I cast my ballot. My brother-in-law Bill cast his ballot – for the other guy. We do not see the world through the same lens. I love my brother-in-law – always have, always will. As at every step of every day, there is but one true path: love. Love the Lord your God, love your neighbor, as you love yourself.

At the brink, we may fall into the grip of fear. In fear, I recoil, crouch, hide, protect, lash out. In fear, I do not see you, I see only the harm you may inflict upon me and upon those whom I love. In fear, I grow small and smaller. Until I – little beloved Ledlie – is utterly lost. At the brink, in fear, there is but one true course: love. Perfect love casts out fear: the only antidote. With love, I am okay. I am enough. So are you. So is each and every one of God’s beloved. With love, in love, I see you. With love, I see you, beloved. I see them, beloved.

With love, not fear, we reach out, open hearts, arms of compassion. Gotta do it. I’ve learned that when I feel overwhelmed, stricken with anxiety, I am probably trying to solve too many problems, or trying to solve problems beyond my scope. I need to focus: choose one thing, one place of need and respond. When bad and scary things happened in the world, Mr. Rogers told the children in his neighborhood, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” Yes, look for the better angels among us; their witness will reassure, inspire us. Once upon a time, this was good advice for us. But we are small children no longer; the advice for us now: “***be*** the helper small children need to see.” She needed a hero, so that’s what she became.

Today, we celebrate all saints, the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. We lift up especially those known to you and me, those whose death calls upon our hearts, whose life and memory is present, poignant. Scores of you shared scores of names for us to lift in prayer. I have read their names, been reciting their names in prayer. A few I know, most I do not. As with a visit to one of our war memorials, a cemetery, or the columbarium, in their company, my soul grows quiet, the fragility and sanctity of our lives – however we lived those lives – our lives are precious. We are in the midst of holiness.

As we celebrate saints of yore, we celebrate the saints before us. Those who shall be baptized. *Name*, we know this is a big step in your life, perhaps years in the making. Do not underestimate the power of the living God to set your life upon a new course. We who are witnesses this day, we are here for you. And we are grateful: you inspire us. You give us hope. Your witness invites us to commit ourselves anew this day to Live God’s Love.

We celebrate the saints who preceded us as the people of St. Columba’s. Those who built this church, who blessed this place – this building and community – with their prayers, their tears, their lives. Young and old, who cried in need, who poured out blessing with abundance, whose arms embraced the stranger, lifted the chalice, who were nourished with the Word of the Living God. Those who were buried and baptized.

I cannot recount the lives of all the saints of St. Columba’s, so I share just one recent story, an update. Many of you have met members of the Khwaja family. Seven years ago, our Refugee Response Ministry welcomed Mr. & Mrs. Khwaja and their three children as they arrived in the United States from Afghanistan. We were with them as they found a home, schools, medical care, jobs, and as the Khwaja’s offered welcome to others arrived from Afghanistan. This past year, all but the youngest became U.S. citizens and one month ago Alice Goodman assisted as they registered to vote. Beloved, the bright lights of love are in our midst.

In this celebratory year of St. Columba’s 150th anniversary, you are going to hear that our capital campaign is off to a thrilling, breath-takingly strong start. Millions of dollars already committed. How can this be? It is because we are in the company of the saints, of those who dare to dream, then commit themselves to walk the walk. Oh, when the saints go marching in. I hope you’ll be in that number. Not because I want your money for the campaign. I hope you’ll be in that number because, as every one of you who has ever given of yourself sacrificially knows, you have discovered the great surprise that giving feels good, really good; giving is good for our souls. Perfect love casts out fear. Not everyone is in a position to give to this campaign. It is okay. Our circumstances vary. We are all part of the one body.

If you have not yet or never made a financial pledge to the mission and ministry of St. Columba’s, today is your day. You will be glad you did. Some ask, how much? Each year I have been with you, I have pledged a tithe – ten percent – of my combined salary and housing allowance. I have not always given that much. Life is complicated. As a kid, I gave part of my allowance – first a nickel, then a dime. The first time I pledged as an adult, I measured my gift as a percent. I started with 1% of my income. It felt huge. Daunting. Like doing one hundred push-ups if I normally do five. Start where you are. Then stretch. How far? Until it feels too far, then a bit farther; that’s a good amount.

I invite every single one of us to do two things: first pledge to the annual stewardship campaign. This is for our operating budget. From the perspective of we who are givers, this is good for your soul and mine. From the perspective of the church receiving our gifts, this is the lifeblood of our ministry. This is the way – the only way – we are able to live into our calling as the body of Christ – in real, tangible ways – salaries, programs, utilities, outreach, worship.

Next: pledge to the 150th anniversary campaign. As we celebrate the saints who have gone before us, we drink from wells we did not dig. In this anniversary campaign, we are digging new wells from which future generations may drink. We are bearing witness in our lives, planting seeds for a future not our own.

As we live God’s love, we are given the story of the raising of Lazarus. A gift: the promise of resurrection in the mess of our lives. Perfect in this moment. In it, we see the blame and lament when we cannot control the outcome; if you had been here, Jesus! Fix this. The intimacy: Jesus’ close friends; he spent time in Bethany with Mary, Martha, Lazarus. The family dynamics – one sister busy, one sister quiet. Tears: Mary and Martha wept, the neighbors wept, Jesus wept. The mystery and unknowability of God’s purpose. The offense. I am doing this for their sake. But it’s not a game, not a teaching moment. Jesus loved Lazarus.

The sheer power of God to create the future: Take away the stone. Lazarus, come out!

The call: Unbind him. I raised him; you unbind him. Unbind those who are bound. Let them go, all of them. I am the God of liberation, of new life. Even, especially in the midst of death.

And the foretaste. That we remember this day. As Lazarus was risen, Jesus risen, we are risen. “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In closing, the story is told of a small congregation on the outskirts of a large metropolis. They were a good and faithful people who gathered week in and week out to offer their prayers and praises to God, to support one another in times of difficulty, and to reach beyond as they were able to help those in need.

The years passed, the city grew. More people built houses and moved in near this small congregation. Many new neighbors were starting out with young families, eager for their children to learn about God’s love and the way to follow Jesus. They came and came until the little church was bursting at the seams. So the elders gathered to pray, to ask God to show them the way forward. As they prayed and conversed, a dream came into view. They dreamed of a community with open doors and ample rooms to welcome one and all.

This took place in the 1950’s when St. Columba’s was a small congregation here in the outskirts of Tenleytown. That dream became the large, welcoming church we know today. But first of course, those parishioners realized they had to build, which meant they had to raise money, which meant they had to give generously. So they did.

So generous were those earlier Columban’s, that some even brought and gave their family silver; we have the records. Most of the silver was sold to pay for construction. But there was a silversmith in our midst, who melted down some of the silver, and hammered out a chalice and paten {acolytes present these items} – because we needed them, and as a reminder that in Christ we are one body. One body, each of us with generous hearts, blessed to live God’s love. Amen.