

“Hope for All Souls”

Reading: Matthew 5:1-12; Revelation 7:9-17

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Friday was, of course, Halloween, and the debate over the pagan roots of the holiday is a debate for another time. Various traditions within the church through the centuries have tried to direct the focus for Halloween onto a more redemptive focus than it might otherwise have, and again, the debate over how successful the church has been will have to be held some other time. Though the Wesleyan Church and many other Protestant churches often shy away from such celebrations, many Christians through the years celebrate this Sunday as All Saints' Day or All Souls' Day, depending on your tradition. Some churches make a distinction between celebrating all saints (as in those who have been officially sainted by the church) versus all those who have died (all souls), saint or not, while other churches recognize that all those who die in Christ are properly called “saints,” and there's less of a distinction. Either way, we don't have to get technical to take the time to remember those loved ones, those friends, those Christians, those examples who have gone before us.

Like I said, most Wesleyan churches probably are not taking time to observe All Souls' Day today, and we in this congregation have rarely done so in my time here. But this year is different. Pastor Carey and I did some counting: On January 1st we will have been at Pocono Lake for eight years, and in those eight years we have officiated at funeral services for twenty-two people. Eleven of those funerals have been in the last year. Many of those people were a part of this congregation, some of them were more extended family members or friends, but literally half of the funerals we have done here have been in the last year.

It has been a year in which we have not finished grieving our last friend before we have had to start grieving the next friend. It's been a hard year for many of you in that regard, because of course grief doesn't really go away, and even when we do come to a new normal after experiencing such a loss, it takes a surprisingly long time. And so today is All Souls' Day for us, a day of remembering, a day of reflecting, and maybe even a day in which we do a little group therapy with one another through our preaching. Or better yet, maybe it's a day of group theology, because our proclamation and our celebration of the Lord's Supper are deeply powerful, deeply impactful events in which we gather together in the presence of our Lord.

And the strange thing is that our Lord calls us blessed as we mourn. It's almost obscene, isn't it? Does Jesus really understand the pain of grief? The Beatitudes call us “blessed,” or “happy,” or “fortunate;” the implication is that the people mentioned in the Beatitudes are recipients of divine favor because of their circumstances. Does He understand what He's saying? But Jesus does not minimize the reality of our loss; He knows its weight. He wept over His dead friend Lazarus, even though He knew that He was about to resuscitate Lazarus. Jesus calls us blessed when we mourn, for we will be comforted. It seems like such small consolation, to be comforted in the face of loss, because we don't want comfort, we want to have what was lost returned to us.

We can't have that, though. Death is too strong, too final, too cruel. Yes, during His ministry Jesus did bring back some of the dead to life, and that was surely a cause for great joy, but those people all died again one day. As miraculous as those resuscitations were, death still had them in the

end. All Souls' Day is a day of remembrance, but sometimes remembrance is bitter in light of the present loss.

But Jesus was not wrong. The Beatitudes are not an embarrassment to us because they are full of contradictions and impossibilities. On the contrary, the Beatitudes sound contradictory only because this present age refuses to bow before the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We mourn on All Soul's Day, and we mourn by a graveside, because we are currently in the in-between time, the age between Christ's coming and His return. We grieve because of what has happened, but we rejoice because of what will happen.

Most holidays, when you think about it, are focused on remembering or celebrating something that happened in the past that still has an impact on our present. Independence Day, for example, or Veteran's Day coming up soon, call us to remember actions or events or sacrifices or people from the past who did something important enough to shape our present. But Christian holidays take on a different flavor. Yes, at Christmas or Easter or All Souls' Day we remember something from the past, but we're also remembering the future. The events of the coming of God's kingdom to us not only happened in the past, and they not only impacted our present, and they don't only give us something to look forward to in the future, they also give us, paradoxically, something to *remember* that hasn't even happened yet. We know how the story ends. We know what the future involves. We've written about it and sung about it and painted pictures of it and told and re-told the story. It hasn't happened, but if you've soaked in that story long enough, you can picture it already.

In Christ, we remember the future. As painful as death is, we can still affirm with Jesus that those who mourn are blessed, because they will be comforted, and we know what that comfort looks like. Laura Everett says, "We are a people trained to say 'death' and 'resurrection' in one breath." We don't end our sentences with "death," and our memories of those souls who have known Christ do not end with death. For followers of Christ, we also remember Christ's promise to those who follow Him. We cannot speak of death without immediately also speaking of resurrection. We can't read the middle chapters without immediately skipping ahead in our minds to the end as well.

"We are a people trained to say 'death' and 'resurrection' in one breath." We join in with the church's ancient proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord: Jesus, the one who died the shameful death of a criminal, the one who spent three days in the grave, the one who descended to the place of the dead, *is* Lord. *Is*. He is alive, He has been resurrected, He has conquered death, He is more alive and any one of us is right now. He is alive as we were meant to be alive. What we will be has not yet been made known, but we know that when Christ returns and brings His kingdom in its fullness, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

The one who was dead is now alive and is reigning over earth and heaven. And we remember the end of the story, the end that hasn't happened yet: it ends with the continuation of the resurrection, with God's great victory over death and hell, with His saints gathered around Him singing out their thanks for His goodness and faithfulness to them. Those souls who have died in Christ, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, truly are blessed. The Beatitudes aren't wrong; they're just early. They're a foreshadowing of the eternal truth of what God is doing with those souls who are faithful to Him.

So today, as we remember those souls who have preceded us in death, we do not merely remember their deaths. We don't even just remember their lives. "We are a people trained to say 'death' and 'resurrection' in one breath," and so we also look forward to the resurrection of those who died in Christ. For the brothers and sisters in Christ who died in the last year, we remember that God was faithful to them during their lives, and therefore God will be faithful to them in their deaths. We remember that their lives and their faith in the face of death was a testimony to Christ's Lordship, and so they serve to us as examples of trusting in God's goodness even in this in-between time when it seems as though death is winning.

And so we continue to trust in God's faithfulness, even as we mourn. Even in the face of death and loss, even when we don't feel like we believe, even when it seems absurd to continue on in the faith, we proclaim with our lives that Christ has died for us, Christ is risen from the dead, and Christ will return to complete His work. We make this proclamation with our lives, with our words, with our actions, with our relationships, and with our worship of Jesus. Today we make this proclamation by celebrating the Lord's Supper together. Through this bread and juice we remember Jesus' death for us, yes, but there's more to it than that: we proclaim Christ's death until He comes again. This Supper is a means whereby Christ is present with us and among us, and He strengthens us in this faith when we have run out of our own strength. The continued grace of God to us is yet more proof that we remember our future rightly, that we are correct to speak of resurrection as often as we speak of death.

Benediction: Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever.



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