“An Unending Hymn of Praise”

Preached at Wollaston Congregational Church

On November 6th, 2016

**Focus text:** Ephesians 1:11-23

My friends, we may live in uncertain times. But there is one thing we can be absolutely sure about: we are mortal, and we know that we must die. Those who believe that there is nothing beyond the material world sometimes accuse Christians of being in denial about death. But, I think that to be a Christian is to face the fact of mortality in a way that some others cannot bring themselves to do. And I believe that it is important to face that fact before rushing to the ideas of heaven and life after death.

If anything, we believers face the facts of death better than others, because we are in the business. We acknowledge the deaths of individuals in funeral liturgies and memorial services. We provide comfort for loves ones, encouraging them to grieve to the fullest and healthiest extent. We provide a place to acknowledge that death is inevitable. We offer ways to express grief and sadness, in a world that would prefer to ignore and deny it.

The difference, I think, between believers and those who deny the existence in God is primarily about hope. It is about the hope that this world has meaning beyond our single individual lives. It is about hope in sacred stories that draw us into the mystery of our eternal God. And it is about the hope of the vast movement of faith in God through Jesus Christ, that is the church. The hope of the church is in an eternal continuum of “saints”.

This continuum begins in the earliest stirrings human understanding of something “other” and goes on to the assumption of these days that we know it all. And that movement goes on into the times beyond the present that we cannot even imagine.

Today, as we celebrate All Saints day, we have another opportunity to acknowledge our mortality, in a particular way. Because today, we think less about our individual selves and where we are headed, and more about the great company of saints, of which we hope to be a part.

I talked earlier about how various traditions interpret the idea of saints. Just to recap … those in the Catholic traditions may think of individuals, now dead, who were exemplary in their devotion to God. Many were martyred for their faith, and all sacrificed greatly. Pope Francis has said, “if there is one thing typical of a saint it is that they are genuinely happy … they found joy in God’s love and that is why they are called blessed.”

In the Protestant tradition we generally think of all our ancestors in the faith as saints. On All Saints Day we often acknowledge those who have died over the past year, or as today, over the living memory of our church. This week the United Church of Christ shared a devotional by minister Emily Carrington Heath, who wrote "Protestant Christians don't just think of saints as people who are extraordinarily holy. Sainthood, for us, has little to do with being extraordinarily good. In fact, the biggest barrier between you and sainthood is this: you're still alive.”

And then in some traditions, often in African American churches, the saints are *all the believers*. The saints include those who are alive and physically present in the church today, and those who have gone before. This is the New Testament understanding of saint and the saints referred to in our passage from Ephesians today. In this case the biggest barrier between those who are saints or not is simply a matter of hope. This is an insight into the mystery of our life with God beyond this world. For the earliest believers the barrier between the living and the dead was considered unimportant.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians, praises the community for their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love toward *all* the saints. This means all those who join with them in community and worship, as well as those who have already passed from life to death.

One of the ways in which I find Christian ministry rewarding, is the time I spend with families who are grappling with the inevitability of death. A few years ago, I was filling in for a pastor who was away. I went to meet with a family whose beloved matriarch, Deedee, was nearing the end of life. I had heard that the husband, Robert, was having a hard time letting go. Deedee had been suffering from a chronic illness

for a number of years, and he had cared for her at home as long as possible. Now she was in a rehab facility. The end was clearly near, but Robert had asked the medical staff to intervene and keep her alive.

On one visit, I went to sit with Deedee a little while, before Robert arrived for the day. Her body was, at this point, a shell. She couldn’t interact, except for a few words now and then. She slept most of the time. She was at a stage where she had one foot in this world and one in the next.

As I left, I bumped into Robert at the door. It was the opportunity I needed. I knew that one of the things that bound Deedee and Robert together was a deep, traditional Christian faith. I invited Robert to talk with me in a visitors lounge before he went to his wife’s room. I asked him how he was doing, what were his worries. I asked him if he had any decisions he needed to make. This was the opening for him to say he was so afraid lose Deedee. But he had realized that the medical interventions were not making her living any better. It was time to say goodbye.

Over the coming days, I met with Robert and other members of the family and talked about how this might go. They expressed their desires for the funeral and burial. I reminded them of their faith in the resurrection of the saints. I reminded them that Deedee was certainly one of that company, having spent a life of devotion and service. I reminded Robert that the time between Dee Dee’s passing to eternal life, and his reuniting with her would pass in the blink of an eye. In facing the reality of the situation, he was able to find courage. Deedee’s life was a song of praise,

but in death she would join the choir of the unending hymn of praise.

Another funeral I had to do, while covering in another church, was a little different. Leonard, the gentleman who died would be receiving full military honors. I met with his son and daughter-in-law who had requested the funeral. They were people of faith, connected with church and thoughtful about their faith. But it turned out that Leonard had no interest in religion, although he had agreed on having a Christian funeral if that was what the family wanted to do.

Researching Leonard’s life a little, and listening to the stories, I learned that Leonard’s identity as a highly ranked officer was especially important to him in his later years. He had experienced more than his share of sadness in his life. Although he returned home safe from World War two, his brother had not. In the US Army Aircorps, he flew bombing raids over Europe. He must have also lost many friends. He also flew relief missions to Poland, dropping supplies that the people of Warsaw desperately needed. It was not a surprise to me that Leonard may have given up on the idea of a loving God and a purposeful universe, in those dark days. Or at least he had decided not to use the vehicle of religion to connect with his maker. But, as I expressed during the funeral, I had no doubt that God understood all that and would welcome Leonard into the company of the saints. Even though Leonard could not bring himself to raise his singing voice in life, he too, I am sure, could not resist joining in the unending hymn of praise in heaven.

Today, as we remember beloved saints of this congregation, we may grieve that their hard work for this church is no longer valued. I look out into the congregation today, and see how we are scattered around this spacious sanctuary. As we remember that it was once full and resounding with powerful singing, we may feel a sense of hopelessness. But, we do well to remind ourselves that just as all people are mortal, so are our institutions. The church in Ephesus, to which today’s passage was written, was long gone, many generations ago. But that the letter reminds the Ephesians of the hope to which God has called them. It is the hope to which we are also called.

Because *The Church*, the body of Christ, has never ceased to live. Not in 2,000 years since its inception. And it is alive, well and growing in many parts of the world today. We can remember that the church is also known as the communion of saints, as in the apostle’s creed. We do not worship alone, today. We are joined by Christians throughout the world and throughout the ages.

Today we will be celebrating communion. Some churches had the tradition of including “The Great Thanksgiving” in their communion liturgy. This is a time when Christians are invited to join in the “unending hymn of praise” to God. The hymn declares that God is “holy, holy, holy.” It is an act of praise that binds Christians throughout time and space. It is the song we imagine that the angels and saints

in heaven are continually singing.

If I had to choose a saint who had died as well as they had lived, with courage and authenticity, I would choose my former pastor the Rev Dr Kenneth Powell.

Ken died on October 8th 2007. And he lived his experience with terminal cancer

openly and with honesty about his coming death. He said a proper good bye to everyone in his life, and made his wishes clear for his memorial. The printed order of worship for the concluded with these words, attributed to Saint Augustine:

All shall be Amen and Alleluia.

We shall rest and we shall see,

We shall see and we shall know,

We shall know and we shall love,

We shall love and we shall praise.

Behold our end which is no end.

Amen