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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/1/2009, All Saints Sunday
Revelation 21:1-6, John 11:32-44
“A Canvas Requiring Eternity”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴³When [Jesus] had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” (John 11:43-44, RSV)

The holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ does not deny that we die. It simply refuses to abandon people to death. And it feels justified in this sacred stubbornness, for faith clings to Jesus, who is the Resurrection and the Life.

A few years back, our family took a journey with a feeling of a pilgrimage about it. We were off to Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania to visit our dear old Pastor, Raymond Shaheen. Some of you here in this church will remember him, for he preached and led a retreat here.

There at Susquehanna University, he was a kind of goodwill ambassador for the University. His official title was “Special Assistant to the President of Susquehanna University,” but everyone there simply called him “Padre.”

This trip was the last time we saw Pastor Shaheen. He was ninety-one years old. His beloved Winifred had already passed on to the Lord. He was frail, but charming and full of faith as always. When he saw our boys, with their ragged jeans and long hair, he exclaimed “My! You look good. You look exactly as teenagers ought to look!” He had arranged for our son Sam to have a tour of the University while we were there, and he gently kidded Carol by pointing out to the student tour guide that the young one who was to go on the tour was Sam, not Carol. He led us out to his gazebo and served us ice cream.

He asked us to return the next day and visit him again, which we were glad to do, but that day, he was weak and in bed. No matter. His nurse escorted us to his bedroom, where he wanted to talk with us and to pray with us. We sensed that this would be our final conversation, and we counted ourselves blessed to have known this man.

His funeral not long afterwards was led by his son, Rev. David Shaheen. There were many moving testimonies to Padre and a strong sermon proclaiming the Word of God -- the Word to which Pastor Shaheen had devoted his life and his considerable talents. The conclusion of the funeral was most touching. The son, Pastor David, simply said, “The last word belongs to my father,” and then he walked away from the microphone. Carol and I did not know what that meant, until suddenly, over the sound system, we heard that familiar, melodious voice of

the father, Pastor Raymond Shaheen. The son had recorded one of his father's funeral sermons, and he played for us the end of that sermon.

The text was from John 14 -- that beautiful saying of our Lord about the many mansions in God's house. To set the stage a bit, the Disciples are sad because Jesus has told them that he is soon to leave them. Judas has already gone out into the night to betray Jesus. Peter has sworn that he will never forsake Jesus, but that proves not to be so. The disciples, naturally, are troubled at the thought that their Master is soon to be taken from them, and so Jesus comforts them with these words:

¹Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.

²In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. (John 14:1-3, KJV)

As Pastor Shaheen was ending his sermon on this text, he recalled a mission trip he had taken to Europe. He had met a friend in Germany, but was soon to take the train to Romania, as I recall it, to preach there. This was back in the days of the Iron Curtain. Pastor Shaheen faced various uncertainties on this trip, including unfamiliarity with the languages and with the land and its ways. But his friend was from that land, and he reassured Pastor Shaheen. He said that he was going on ahead and that Pastor Shaheen need not be anxious, that he need only to get on that train and his friend would be waiting for him when he arrived.

A simple story, but rich in meaning. Pastor Shaheen has now set sail and left his earthly life. But in dying, he journeyed to that far land where Jesus has already gone, and so all will be well. Christ has headed on there ahead of him and will be glad to receive him again.

When Pastor David Lotz was here this past Sunday, he was very moved to be back among people he loved so much and who loved him. He spoke of this with me after the liturgy. He said it did his heart good to stand in the chancel and to see so many faces that are dear to him. But there is more: he also saw faces of dear ones who have passed on to the nearer presence of Christ. He was not hallucinating, but rather seeing with the eyes of love and the eyes of faith. "There sits Louise Schalow," I can imagine him thinking. "There is John Puelle singing in the Choir. There sits Margie Reyer. There in his chair in the chancel, Alan Hoffman." Many a pastor would think along the same lines. This beautiful nave here at Immanuel has been graced by some awfully good people, and the heart easily draws them to mind as the pastor gazes out at the congregation.

Let me say it again: Pastor Lotz was not hallucinating when he perceived saints of old sitting in our pews here at Immanuel. He was seeing with the eyes of faith and of love. And the things he saw were the most true of all. I offer two reasons:

First, these threescore and ten years do not amount to sufficient scope for the gifts and spirit of our loved ones who died in the Lord -- including some quiet and

humble saints who were not well known here on earth, but were known and treasured in heaven. They might have lived to old age and grey hairs, but we swear, they were not done. In a way, many of them were just getting started, just reaching the pinnacle of their powers. They were seasoned by their years, they were wise, they were patient, they had willing hearts to share what life had taught them. And we needed them! No matter how long they lived, they should have lived even longer.

That's how I feel about Pastor Shaheen. That's how I feel about my mother and my father, both of blessed memory. That's how many of you feel about those you have loved but who have died. We feel that our loved one simply did not have enough time on this earth. Even if that one lived to be ninety-one years old, as Pastor Shaheen did, still it seemed to me and to many of us, that that was insufficient, that that canvas was too small for the man, that there was a kind of goodness in the man that needed more scope, a larger stage, and that his story was too soon over. The death of a loved one sometimes fills us with the conviction that death is an offense, a blunder, that this cannot be right a human life should be so short! We need more track. The life of a believer needs eternity for a canvas.

That's what we believe, and I think we are right to do so. Death was in no way part of our creation. Death was an evil, alien invasion of Eden. But it does not belong. And the resurrection of Jesus means that death has over-reached itself in laying hold of the people of God. Its grasp on our loved ones is invalid. So if we should picture those who rest in Christ as still alive, perhaps even giving us a smile now and again, then that is no illusion, but an insight to the truth of things. Humanity was not built for anything so paltry as seventy years, or a hundred years, or twice that, or even ten thousand years. Let us lift up our estimate of things. The life of God's people needs bigger scope than what we have known so far.

And the second reason why Pastor Lotz is right to picture his loved ones here is because of what we are about to declare in the Third Article of the Creed:

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen

I want us to note two phrases in particular: "the resurrection of the body" and the "communion of a saints. First, concerning the body: What did Jesus say to the man in the tomb? Did he summon forth his spirit? Did he say, "Spirit of Lazarus, come forth!" No. He spoke to the *man*. "Lazarus, come forth," and the man did -- body, soul, and spirit all together. The man came forth and Jesus commanded that he be released from his grave clothes so that he could hug his sisters again and they could hug him. How good that will feel! To hold our loved ones again in a hug! Do not abandon them to non-existence or to memories or spiritual influences.

Think higher thoughts than that. On All Saints Sunday, we are glad to anticipate seeing our loved ones again, lock, stock, and barrel, body, soul, and spirit together. It will be what is called a “glorified body,” with powers like those of the resurrected Jesus, but it will be the person himself, herself.

But it is the other phrase that is especially on my heart these days: “the communion of saints.” I am figuring things this way: what is good for the preacher is probably good for the people too. Throughout my ministry, and with increasing earnestness these days, I am trying to remain mindful of the Communion of Saints. It is for that reason that I approve of Pastor Lotz picturing saints of old sitting in our pews here at Immanuel.

Christian life benefits from that sacred imagination in which we hold ourselves accountable not only to the opinions of the world, but also to the opinions of our parents and grandparents in the Lord, to the passions and convictions of Mother Teresa, blessed Martin Luther, St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom, St. Paul, Mary the mother of our Lord, and chiefly to him who is Lord of all, even Jesus Christ.

Yes, and we do well to bring to mind those whose names Assisting Minister Georgia Lind will soon be reading aloud for us. Let us remember these folks, and in remembering, be strengthened.

Remember them especially as they are now, at this moment. They are with Christ, and so are somehow present with him in this nave where we are gathered in His name and in the Blessed Sacrament. Our Communion rail here at Immanuel could well extend East and West thousands of miles, to accommodate all our brothers and sisters in the Lord, including Pastor Shaheen, including my parents, including your loved ones, including Martin Luther and John Chrysostom and St. Paul of old.

The trick of the Christian life is to picture these people. Especially picture them with the clarity of vision and goodness they have now with Christ. Many of them were good and faithful in life. They are even more so now in the Church Triumphant. Picture them and try not to disappoint them in word and in deed. That is what this preacher tries to do: to not disappoint the Communion of Saints in word and deed. You try too. And in the trying you will be honoring your loved ones who now rest from their labors with Christ, and you will be bringing honor to the One in whom they rest, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.