W Thomas - All Saints Sermon - 11-01-15
Christ Episcopal Church, Middletown NJ

We're festooned, more so than normal. We've got trumpets, marvelous trumpets, kicking in. Additional choir voices adding to the joy.

And it's the day that we call All Saints Day. And it's actually one of those rare occasions when All Saints Day actually falls on the Sunday. So we've got all of these connections.

And as I look around the church and I see everyone here, I also see that indeed you did bring pictures of loved ones. The saints of your lives. The ones that told you stories that helped prepare you to be where you are right now.

So we have this great cloud of witnesses with us in this place at this time. Now it's an interesting thing about saints and the Episcopal Church. This is where it confuses some people.

Often we have folks sitting in our pews that may have come out of a Roman Catholic tradition, as I did as a child. And for that tradition, the idea of saints was to use them as intercessors, to pray for them. I mean, come on, St. Anthony, I can't find it.

Where are you? Jesus is busy. That's the old joke along that line. But for us as Episcopalians, we recognize that Jesus Christ is our only mediator and advocate.

So what need do we have of saints? Well, let me tell you. Saints are those who have a relationship with God I can only aspire to. Those whose trust in the love of God and the way they share that love is so overwhelming.

If I could be but one, if I could follow one, if I could aspire to find one to give me this great sense, oh, it would be great for me. So for us, saints offer emulation. It's a little bit like a stained-glass window where you can see something out, but not too clearly, but feel something like the picture of a saint.

But you can see God's grace flowing back through that colored glass, perhaps through that image, in a way to guide and give good sense that God is fully present. Now for me, again, I'll draw on my roots and tell you a little story about my sixth grade year. Now I went to public school, not parochial school, in Westchester County, New York, in a little town of Chappaqua, but I was also as a child attending, as I said, to the Roman Catholic Church.

And in sixth grade, what happens? Confirmation! And so I got to go to confirmation classes. On Sundays, poor Sister Mary Concepta, I was in her class. I asked questions.

Anyway, I was there, and as we were going through confirmation, she gave us something to do that just made my imagination soar. I didn't think it could be that much fun. She said, I want you to go find a saint that you really like.

Research this saint. This is to a sixth grade boy. Research? And when you pick the saint you like, that saint's name can be your confirmation name.

You see, when I was born and baptized, William, well that's my father's best friend's name from the Navy. Carl, Carl is my grandfather on my mother's side and has deep meaning for me. But to get to pick my own name.

So I started to do some research, and I found St. Francis. Now you're all thinking, he found St. Francis of Assisi. No, just the name alone sounded wrong, and when I did a little bit more research on him, I discovered he was in the middle of the town taking his clothes off in front of people, and the sixth grader, heck, I wouldn't even take my clothes off to get in the shower.

No, I did some more research, and I found St. Francis Xavier. Now St. Francis Xavier was one of the founders of the Jesuits. Ignatius Loyola was the first one.

He created, Ignatius did an amazing spiritual discipline. They were like soldiers for Christ, because they were soldiers. Now St. Francis Xavier, in finding the order, went through a lot.

He found Jesus in his life, gave up the sword, but not the determination. His determination led him, and you see this is what captured my imagination, he went to China and to Japan in the 1500s as a missionary and died there. He was convicted.

He knew that Jesus Christ was his Savior and Lord, which evidently was Sister Mary Concepta's whole point in the first place for me to figure that out. Could I make that connection to confirmation? And of course, being me, I went overboard. I decided I would look for other people who were saintly like that, that I would like to follow and emulate, and of course that's when I told my mother I'm going to be a priest at sixth grade.

My mother said to me, I don't think you've thought this through well yet. So she had me talk to Mr. McGuire, my fifth grade teacher. Remember I was in

public school, and he pointed out that I had missed something in the equation of life.

Thank God I waited because Edna Marie. I discovered this, there are girls, and that would be a problem being a Roman Catholic priest, among other things. So it's all worked out quite well.

So now you know a little bit more about my story. You know a little bit more about how I how I connect to the story of God and my story and the story of our shared story, and as we listen to Scripture week in and week out, we not only hear the story of Jesus but those around Jesus, and the entrance into the stories that we hear today begins with that Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. I have been to more funerals than I need to be, both professionally and as somebody who cares for somebody who's died, and quite often I hear this passage from Isaiah read about those great oaks and the wines, well-matured wines, strained fair.

What is heaven? What a marvelous place to be in is part of the proclamation, but clearly we're dealing with somebody who has gone and is now in that new life, that different life, and that sets the stage for Lazarus. The Scripture that we hear today in the gospel, Martha and Mary's brother, Jesus's dear friends, Lazarus has died. He has been dead for four stinking days.

As Martha said, there was a stench by the time Jesus got there. What are you going to do? Well, here's the thing that I think is interesting. How would Lazarus tell his story from this moment on? Lazarus is in the tomb, bound up in the bandages, we'll let the references to the mummy and the whole aspect of Halloween dissipate, but it's what he looks like in the tomb, wrapped in cloth, and he's there, perhaps sensing, approaching, whatever, that wine-strained, clear.

What is it to sort of be in that netherworld, for lack of a better term, closest to God, and all of a sudden Jesus is intruding? Now, Jesus is speaking to the crowd, but also speaking to Lazarus, and depending upon how you see Jesus speak, how you hear him, what tone of voice he says, says something about how Lazarus might tell his story. If Lazarus heard Jesus say, Lazarus, come out! Lazarus might say, well, I had no choice, I had to come out, Jesus commanded me, but what if Lazarus could tell his story this way? Jesus said to him, Lazarus, come out, and Lazarus had the choice to stay where he was, being drawn more fully to whatever comes next, or being brought back into the life where Jesus is fully present. So now Lazarus could perhaps tell his story about how love is so great for him, he was given a choice to truly come into the world and follow Jesus, knowing fully what the world is capable of.

What choices are we given as we understand our own stories? Just last Thursday, the Monmouth Convocation of the Diocese of New Jersey met in this very space. It was a grand night. Thank you all for making everything so wonderful to bring our brothers and sisters and Christ and our Bishop here.

And the Bishop let us all know that for the next three or four years, he is going to stress something. It's going to come out in kind of a slogan. It basically sounds like this, know your story, live it boldly.

Know your story, live it boldly. What is it to first know your story? That takes some reflection. We have examples of people knowing or sharing their stories.

And what is it to try to find a place to live it boldly? Could that not be being someplace where you hear somebody talking and you feel that you could actually let them hear part of your story, invite them to ask you or to be open to that? There's a connection to what it means to share our story, to be closer to Christ. During the Eucharistic prayer, we reconnect with Christ. Do this in remembrance of me.

I often use the word member to remind myself that my arms, my legs are members of my body. So we are reconnected, remembered to Christ's body when we are nourished in the Holy Eucharist, nourished by Jesus's love, this same love that enveloped Martha, Mary, Lazarus, all who follow him. But then there's something else we say too and perhaps it just slides by so fast you've said it so often you don't notice it.

And now as our Savior Christ has taught us, begins the words the priest says after we say the great Amen. And now as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say. Have you ever thought about how bold it is to say the Lord's Prayer? Something you have said over and over and over again, perhaps to the point where you don't hear it because it goes by so fast.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. On earth as it is in heaven. This is the place that Lazarus found himself in.

On earth as it is in heaven. He was able to come back and say, yes Jesus I will be with you on earth because I know earth can be heaven. It does not have to be way away.

It can be here now. If I can live life boldly enough to share your love, the love you have freely given to me. I think that's what saints do.

Saints understand what it takes to share that love so boldly. Sometimes to the point of giving up their lives. And so when you say I want to be one too, perhaps you're simply saying Lord help me share as boldly as I can the good news you have so freely and lovingly given to me.

All these words I offer in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.