Kevin Powell
All Saints' Sunday

It's been my practice to walk through old cemeteries. These places invite me to slow down and reflect on the lives of those who have gone before us.

Some of the gravestones are magnificent, with elaborate inscriptions and carefully carved symbols, while others are little more than weathered pieces of limestone, their names and dates slowly disappearing beneath the effects of time. Every one of them marks a life that was once as complicated, hopeful, and ordinary as our own.

Someone loved these people. Someone worried about them, laughed with them, argued with them, and grieved when they died.

They were parents and children, neighbours and friends, people who woke each morning with plans for the day and expectations for the future.

And now, in many cases, there is no one left who remembers them.

As I wander among these stones, I find myself wondering how long it takes before we are forgotten. How many generations pass before someone speaks our name for the last time, before the stories of our lives disappear, and

before the last person who remembers the sound of our voice is gone?

It is an unsettling question, because beneath it lies something even more personal. We want to know whether our lives have mattered, whether the love we have given will endure, and whether something of who we are will remain when we are no longer here.

All Saints Sunday invites us to consider these questions, not by offering easy reassurance about the permanence of human memory, but by directing our attention toward something far more enduring.

In today's gospel, Jesus climbs a mountain, sits down among his disciples, and begins to describe the people who are blessed in the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

These words have become so familiar that we sometimes overlook just how extraordinary they are. Jesus is not describing the powerful, the celebrated, or those whose achievements will be remembered for generations.

He is speaking about people whom the world frequently overlooks, people whose lives may never attract attention or leave behind any visible monument.

And yet, Jesus calls them blessed.

Their blessedness does not arise from what they have accomplished or from the recognition they have received. It arises from the gracious presence of God, whose love is not measured according to the standards by which the world determines importance.

This is one of the beautiful truths at the heart of All Saints Sunday. **Our lives do not have to be extraordinary in the eyes of the world to be infinitely precious in the eyes of God.**

We live in a culture that places enormous importance on being remembered. We preserve photographs, collect stories, document achievements, and create monuments because we want some assurance that our lives have meant something.

Yet human memory is fragile, and even our most cherished recollections eventually begin to fade.

Those of us who have lost someone we love know how painful this can be. We may remember their face clearly but struggle to recall the precise sound of their voice. We may remember the warmth of their presence while

forgetting the details of conversations that once seemed so important.

Sometimes it feels as though we are losing them all over again.

And yet, I wonder whether love necessarily disappears when memory begins to fade.

Think about someone who profoundly influenced your life. Perhaps it was a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, or a friend whose kindness helped you through a difficult season. You may no longer remember everything they said or did, but something of their presence remains within you.

Perhaps you find yourself repeating an expression your mother used, extending a kindness you once received, or offering someone the same compassion that was offered to you.

Their influence continues, even when the details of their lives have become less distinct.

In this way, love moves quietly from one generation to another, often without our recognizing how much of who we are has been shaped by those who came before us.

And perhaps this offers us a glimpse of what the church means when it speaks of the communion of saints.

We belong to one another in ways that extend beyond the limits of our individual lives. The love we receive shapes the love we offer, and the grace that has touched us becomes part of the grace we extend to others.

But the Christian promise goes even further than this, because our hope does not ultimately depend upon the influence we leave behind.

It depends upon the faithfulness of God.

When we speak of saints in the Lutheran tradition, we are not speaking only of extraordinary religious figures whose lives were marked by remarkable holiness.

We are speaking about ordinary people who were claimed by God in baptism and sustained by grace throughout lives that were often as imperfect and complicated as our own.

These were people who sometimes struggled to believe, who made mistakes, who loved imperfectly, and who occasionally failed to live according to their deepest convictions.

They were saints not because they had achieved perfection, but because they belonged to Christ.

And the same is true of us.

Sainthood is not a reward for exceptional achievement. It is the gift of belonging to God, whose grace embraces us even in the midst of our incompleteness.

This becomes especially important when we hear Jesus say, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Notice that Jesus does not tell those who grieve to move on, to become stronger, or to put their sorrow behind them. He simply recognizes their mourning and declares that they are blessed.

Not because suffering is good, or because grief somehow makes us more deserving of God's attention, but because God has not abandoned us in our sorrow.

We encounter profound tenderness in a Saviour who does not remain distant from human suffering, but enters fully into the grief and vulnerability of our lives. Jesus himself will weep at the grave of his friend Lazarus, and in time, he too will enter into the mystery of suffering and death.

The promise of the resurrection is not that grief becomes meaningless or that the people we have lost are easily replaced. It is that death does not have the final word over the love of God.

And perhaps that is the most important thing we can proclaim on this All Saints Sunday.

There may come a time when no one remembers our names. The photographs may disappear, the stories may be forgotten, and the gravestones that mark our resting places may eventually become unreadable.

But our belonging to God does not depend upon the endurance of human memory.

I think this becomes especially poignant when we consider those whose memories are slipping away through age or illness. Watching someone we love gradually lose the ability to recognize familiar faces or recall the stories that have shaped their lives brings a particular kind of heartbreak.

Yet even when someone can no longer remember the names of those they love, their identity has not disappeared before God. Their dignity, their worth, and their place within the communion of saints remain secure, not because of what they can remember, but because of the One who holds them in love.

We are not sustained by the strength of our remembering. We are sustained by the faithfulness of God.

And that faithfulness frees us from the exhausting task of trying to make ourselves unforgettable.

Instead, we are invited to live the kind of lives Jesus describes in the Beatitudes, lives marked by mercy, gentleness, compassion, peacemaking, and a hunger for justice.

These qualities rarely produce monuments, but they reveal something of God's kingdom in the ordinary circumstances of human life.

The person who sits quietly beside someone who is grieving, the neighbour who offers help without expecting recognition, the friend who extends forgiveness, and the stranger who makes room for someone who has been excluded are all participating in the life of that kingdom.

Their actions may never be recorded, but they matter because love matters.

And so I return, in my imagination and in person, to those old cemeteries and the names slowly disappearing from their stones.

I wonder about the lives those names represent, about the people they loved, the disappointments they endured, the kindness they offered, and the hopes they carried.

Most of their stories are now beyond our reach, and one day the same may be true of ours.

But perhaps All Saints Sunday invites us to recognize that being remembered forever was never the promise of the gospel.

The promise is that we belong to God, in life and in death, and that nothing can separate us from the love revealed in Jesus Christ.

Today, as we remember those who have died, we bring with us our gratitude, our sorrow, our unfinished conversations, and all the complicated feelings that accompany grief. We remember people who were precious to us, not because they were perfect, but because their lives became part of our own.

And as we speak their names, we trust that they are held within a love far greater than our capacity to remember.

Perhaps, then, the question is not how long we will be remembered, but how fully we can live in the love that has already claimed us.

How might we become more merciful, more generous, more attentive to those whom the world overlooks? How might we offer the comfort we ourselves have received, and become instruments of peace in a world so often divided by fear?

Not because these things will secure our place in history, but because this is what becomes possible when we know that our place in God's heart is already secure.

One day, our names may no longer be spoken, our stories may fade, and the world may carry on without any memory of our presence.

But the love of God will remain.

And within that love, those who have gone before us, those who gather here today, and those who will come after us are held together in a communion that neither time nor death can destroy.

For in Christ, we are never forgotten.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.