Opening Explanation

For those who know me, you know the Feast of All Saints is my favorite holiday of the whole year. It is a day set apart for the express purpose of remembering, honoring, and praying for and with the whole family of God, across every boundary of time and space.

In the Episcopal Church, we talk about something called the Communion of Saints. It is our belief that every Christian who has ever lived, is living now, or ever will live, is bound together in one body, the Body of Christ. Traditionally, November 1st is All Saints Day, and November 2nd is All Souls Day. Incidentally, "Halloween" derived from the Old English "Hallow's Eve"... Hallow, meaning holy or saint, so it is the eve of celebrating the saints. The celebration of All Saints points to that great unseen community reaching down in prayer for the rest of we who are still finding our way. All Souls honors the worth of every human life who has gone before, saint and sinner alike. Together, this whole weekend is a celebration of an eternal bond ... an old, old practice of remembering and rejoicing together in the goodness of a God who does not let death have the final word.

In The Apostle's Creed, one of our oldest prayers, Christians have proclaimed belief in this communion of saints for centuries. Our Catechism describes this communion as "the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those we love and even those who have hurt us, bound together by love, memory, and praise". We are linked to everyone, friend and foe, past and present, whether we feel it or not.

Historically, the word saint described people who lived such remarkably virtuous lives that they were considered worthy of imitation. Tonight we take a more down-to-earth, honest view. For most of us, our saints look like a family member, a coach, a teacher, or a friend... someone whose life, simply by being near ours, made us better people.

And tonight, we are not only honoring the saintly. Every one of us is made perfectly in the divine image of God and also corrupted by the impact of sin. We trust that God's love

holds onto all of us and is slowly transforming all of us, in this life and in the next. Tonight we let our imaginations open beyond the veil that separates life from death, and we remember everyone who made our lives possible.

You will notice incense tonight. We burn it because its rising smoke pictures our prayers rising… a way to let our senses, for a moment, carry us past what we can see and into something larger. You will also have a chance to light a candle, a small, physical way of saying that the light of someone we loved has not gone out, even though we cannot see them anymore. It makes the invisible, visible, so we can remember together.

Tonight is built around mystery, not explanation. I invite you to feel your way through it rather than thinking your way through it, to trust the wisdom of the body beyond merely the intellect. We will move slowly tonight and give real attention to things we usually rush past. Let yourself close your eyes if you want to. Feel with your body. Imagine with your heart.

In a little while, you will hear a few people share about those who has been saints in their lives…people who shaped them simply by how they loved them. Later, when it is time to light candles, we will sing simple, repetitive songs for a while. Sing along or just listen and feel the music, whatever you need. Light a candle in memory of a loved one if or when you feel moved to. I will close that time with a prayer. For now, rest in the slowness. Breathe, and let yourself be here, surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

Looking and Living Beyond the Veil

Isaiah 25:6-9, Romans 8:38-39, John 6:37-40

I have always been a spiritual person. From the time I was a child, I sensed there was more going on than what could be seen with the naked eye. Maybe growing up around horses and dogs had something to do with it…their senses are tuned differently than ours, and it shows: they notice things and respond to things that don't always make sense to us.

Or maybe it was growing up with a Bible full of stories about realities beyond the visible world. People have called me woo-woo over the years. I'm happy to claim it. It’s important to me to live with something like the sixth sense of a wild creature, tuned to realities not everyone notices.

Our reading from Isaiah tonight describes a shroud cast over all people… a veil separating life from death, the known from the unknown. Because we can't see past it, grief can sometimes mire us, even tip us into despair. We hold the hope of resurrection, of a love nothing can shake, of eternal life. But holding onto that hope gets hard when pain and loss feel like the biggest reality in the room.

I tend to collect odd people with odd experiences. A friend of mine tells me she can see and hear people who have passed away. For my friend, deceased loved ones linger near the living, and when she pays attention (she's actually had to train herself to tune most of it out) these people tell her things. Almost always, she says, they are happy, laughing, at ease, free of whatever pain defined their physical lives. My friend has told me things about myself and others she had no earthly way of knowing. She does not profit from any of it. Most people who know her have no idea this is part of her life. And she is not the only person I know with an ability like this. It's remarkable what ordinary people silently carry and never mention, afraid of being thought crazy. I don't think it's crazy. I think it's a glimpse past a veil most of us have simply stopped looking for.

We are proud, scientific creatures, we twenty-first century people. But even our own science tells us real things exist beyond what we can perceive. Think of what we can hear and see. Infra**sound waves** sit below what human ears can register; ultra**sound** sits above it, audible only to bats and dolphins. **Visible** light is a narrow band; ultraviolet and infrared stretch out past it, unseen, and entirely real. The veil isn't superstition. It's just a known feature of how limited our instruments are… even our own bodies.

Paul tells the Romans that nothing… not death, not height, not depth, not anything in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. If we're honest, there are seasons when this divided, grieving world feels like anything but loved. But the veil is not eternal. One day this barrier between what we can feel and what is actually, permanently true will be lifted for good. Imagining that can be an entrance into its own kind of faith.

Jesus tells us, in the gospel of John, that eternal life isn't only what starts after we die, it begins the instant we open ourselves to the life of God, here, and now. Really living is really loving and really being loved. Those we've lost have loved us into who we are today. When Jesus resurrected from the grave, he broke through the shroud of death himself and left us a roadmap through it as well.

Part of being open to the life of God, to living eternal life now, is being open to one another. As part of this mystical Body of Christ, we are **ALL** united. We are part of one another. We can look around and into the eyes of those sitting next to us, knowing that our lives are inextricably linked. Even if we close our eyes, we still feel their presence. In the same way, we can imagine the faces of those we no longer see, knowing that their lives were formed by people we will never meet on this earth. Yet their influence lives on in us, and through us it will move into the future. As we allow the life of God that lived through them, to transform us into the life of God, we become with them, the light of the world, illuminating this earth with the light of Christ. Our lives make what is invisible, visible!

Tonight, we are here to do exactly that: to honor the ones we love and see no longer, to imagine what they might still be teaching us, and to let their witness move through us to become, for someone else, a saint ourselves.