“If Only”

Wisdom 3:1-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

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November 7, 2020

From the Pulpit
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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, All Saints Day (recognized), November 7, 2021, dedicated to the memories of Paul Thomas Santilli, David Earnest Magers, The Rev. Dr. Herbert Goetz, Dana Navin Schultz, Janet Lee Younger, Dr. Richard Moran (Dick) Ward, The Honorable John D. Martin, Lynn Addison (Lindy) Miller, Wilbert Willoughby (Bill) Boden, Dr. Charles Drummond, Helen Rosalind Spears, and George Leonard West, to all who have died of COVID19 in the past two years, to all our loved ones who entered eternal life in this past church year & always to the glory of God!

“If Only”
Wisdom 3:1-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Today as we gather to remember the nine men and three women who have entered eternal life since last All Saints Day, we celebrate the 1025 years of life lived between all of them – an average of 85.4 years.

Thanks be to God for these – our dearly beloved ones!

Last year, the only people in room were Rev. Corzine, Mark, Kevin, our choir soloist and me – with Peter Murray leading our livestream. We lifted up the names of the six men and four women who died from November 1, 2019 – November 1, 2020. Because of the pandemic, only one had a memorial service and reception, two had virtual services, two had very small services with only family
and really close friends present, six of them never had a funeral/memorial service, or reception.

Now that we are back in worship (and hybrid at home), I want to lift up their names one more time – James Arnold Fewlass, Richard H. Kevan, Benjamin F. Wiant, Patricia Likert Pohlman, Margaret Crosby Alexander, Carl Edward Miller, Joan Marguerite Larson Lebold, Arlene Flocken Reynolds, Antonia M. (“Toni”) Carroll, Dr. Willard B. Fernald and Dr. Lawrence W. Walquist, Jr.

May their memories be for each one of us a blessing and may their lights shine eternal.

I invite you to hear Mary’s words again in John 11:32, from the JB Phillips translation of the Bible: ‘When Mary met Jesus, she looked at him, and then fell down at his feet. She said, ‘If only you had been here, Lord, my brother would never have died.’”

“If Only…”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In a scene near the end of the opera, Hamilton, Philip Hamilton, Eliza and Alexander Hamilton’s oldest son – 19-year-old oldest – dies in a pistol duel defending his father’s name and reputation. The grief that ensues for his father and mother is unimaginable. Unless you are a parent who has suffered the devastating death of a son or daughter,
you may not grasp the power and the gravity of that unimaginable grief.

As they sing “It’s Quiet Uptown,” we hear this phrase:

There are moments that the words don’t reach
There’s a grace too powerful to name
We push away what we can never understand
We push away the unimaginable.

All Saints Day feels like this as we remember those whom we have loved and who have loved us and are now gone – this unimaginable feeling. This feeling when there are moments that the words don’t reach. The moment when grace is too powerful to name. We push away what we can never understand. We push away the unimaginable.

Mary and Martha are feeling the unimaginable feeling this morning as they suffer grief following the death and burial of their brother Lazarus. He was too young to die. He had died four days before Jesus’ arrived. The funeral was over. The body was in the cave decomposing. As Jesus enters Bethany, Mary can’t contain herself anymore. She cries out to the approaching Jesus: “if only you had been here, my brother would never have died.”

We are not sure of Mary’s tone as she spoke to her friend as well as her Savior. Was she pleading or bargaining? Was she angry about his seemingly late arrival? Was she whispering in deep grief? Was she simply stating the facts, the truth of the matter – Jesus would never have allowed her brother to die?

Whatever the case, Jesus is deeply moved and troubled to tears by the distress of Mary’s pain and “if onlys.” He goes to the tomb. He
steps into the stink. He raises Lazarus to new life. Mary is right. The unimaginable of Mary’s “if only” comes true.

Like Mary, we have all faced the unimaginable and we gather together today to remember that feeling, to reach deeply into that feeling. Our faces writhed in pain as we ache at times for the unimaginable loss we have gone through. Our tears have flowed until they dried up. For those close to our loved ones, their breaking has broken us as well. We melt in the trauma of the “if onlys” together.

Unlike Lazarus, there will be no physical rising from the dead. Our loved ones are not coming back from the tomb. But, like Mary and Jesus, the unquenchable pain of distress has brought us to our knees. Our “If onlys” rise up. If only we could go down to the grave with people and crumble there with them… If only we could be more human when people reach their lowest point and we fail to be as present as we want to be… If only we could enter into the pain of others when they need us most…

If only we, like Jesus, see the wonder of what God can do… If only we could – like Jesus – be miracle workers and say, “Now unbind him and let him go home” (John 11:44).

If only…

We do what we can do in the face of the unimaginable – We Remember. We can do that together. Today, we remember – with great love – the nine men and three women who have entered eternal life from our congregation this past year. They were amazing witnesses of our faith on earth and now are true Saints of God in heaven – resting in the eternal promises of God’s love. Their losses
Paul Santilli was a true son of Columbus, Ohio. He was born here in 1929 and here he received his degree in Chemical Engineering from The Ohio State University and then in law from Capital University. From there he went on to serve as Vice President and General Counsel at Battelle Institute and Vice President and Secretary of Battelle Development Corporation. Today, we also give thanks for his service to our country as a First Lieutenant in the Air Force during the Korean War. And Paul loved! Paul loved hiking, traveling, reading and golfing. Most of all, he loved you – Joanne. You were his love and light for 63 years and his family.

David Magers, for year and years, could be found each week in worship seated next to his friend, Nell Cole. He loved the music of First Church! He would come for the concerts and he would come for the choir! For many years he worked in Columbus at Columbia Gas and Franklin County Board of Elections. He loved real estate, making it into a second career. Otherwise, he enjoyed finding antiques, watching classic films. He would come in talking about movies that were so old I didn’t know they even were made. At his happiest, he was driving his Jaguars with his black poodles Baron and Max riding alongside.

The Rev. Dr. Herbert Goetz was a pastor of the United Church of Christ for more than 60 years – serving 30 remarkable years as a Navy Captain in the Chaplain Corps with duty stations aboard ships and with the Marine Air Group across the globe. He was a Vietnam veteran – saw years of combat where he was caring for men wounded – unto death. He is buried in Arlington National
Cemetery. Following retirement from active duty, Herb didn’t stop working. He volunteered as a Chaplain for the ROTC at The Ohio State University and the US Navy League, and served as Director of Religion and Education at the Lakeside Chautauqua. He was Executive Minister at First Community Church, and came to me and told me I needed an Associate Minister and then told me he would serve as an interim here until we had an Associate. He didn’t really ask. He just told me. God bless him! That’s the way he was. He also served in many interims in smaller congregations across Central Ohio.

In the story of his life entitled, “For Such a Time as This,” Herb described his desire to share the love of God as a “need to respond to the void in humankind, to an emptiness, known or unknown by acting in a spirit of acceptance and love, and remembering my humanness as I minister to humans as humans in service to my God.” He was here every Christmas Day with Bethlehem on Broad Street as the Chaplain. Herb was always large and in charge – and he was my friend. I wear his Easter and Resurrection stole today to remember him.

**Dana Navin Schultz** was remembered and celebrated in a beautiful service here last month – ten months after her death. It is never too late to hold a memorial service and in COVID times some of us have just given up. But, Hugh didn’t’ give up. Hugh once told me, “Dana was related to everyone in Central Ohio and if she wasn’t related to them, they were her friends.” It’s true. And her mantra was “How Can I Help you?” and “What can I do for you?” Her life of service and love was lived out at the Art Museum, WOSU Public Radio, ProMusica, and First Church. She once was in the kitchen and said to Hugh, “roll up your sleeves, because we are going to be here for
a few hours” – because it needed special cleaning. And she did. She was one to serve – all the time.

**Janet Lee Younger** was a member of First Church for 20 years. She was an amazing woman! She was an artist who served our community at The King Arts Complex for many years. She was a compassionate and kind servant of God. She was also really funny. She grew up in the home of a Black Baptist preacher and she loved coming here because she always loved the beauty of our sanctuary and the shortness of our services. She was amazing. And she lived and loved fully in this life – loving God and her neighbors all the days of her life.

Born and raised in Denver, Colorado, **Dr. Richard Moran (Dick) Ward** was an accomplished surgeon and one of the founding partners of Orthopedic One. He served our country as an Air Force Surgeon and then came to Columbus where he served his residency – and never really left. He was an accomplished orthopedic surgeon. But if you asked him about his life, he would tell you about winning the 1950 Colorado State High School Broad (Long) Jump State Championship with a 22’ 8.5” distance, his hostas with which he registered approximately 200 cultivars (including Alice Gladden) and for which he was awarded the highest honor for his accomplishments, and he would speak of his love for Jane and his family. Dick loved First Church. He loved worshiping with us and simply the call to live out a life of love for all creation.

**The Honorable John D. Martin** was a distinguished judge but I will always remember him in our Book Studies, as a Trustee and at worship at First Church. I loved his sweater (I think he had only one). He was funny, engaging, quiet, brilliant and thoughtful. I told Kaye;
John always reminded me of how Abraham Lincoln must have been. He practiced law in Lancaster, Ohio for more than 40 years – the fifth generation of Martins to do so. John’s greatest love and joy was Kaye and their family. He loved to support them and cheer them on. He could be found on a sideline or beside a court cheering on his grandchildren. He improved the world wherever he was – right up to the very end – volunteering as a community gardener and in the library in Upper Arlington.

**Lynn Addison (Lindy) Miller** was a character – in the best sense of the word. I knew and loved Lindy for 32 years. As he was approaching his 90th birthday and in failing health he told me, “The doctor came in today and asked me if I had a Do Not Resuscitate Order. I told him they could resuscitate me until my 90th birthday on June 7th. And then they can do whatever they want.” He made it – dying one month later – on July 8th.

Lynn Miller was a Veteran and served his country faithfully and well. No one knew the Buckeyes better than Lynn Miller. He once told me, Joe Burrows is the best quarterback to come out of Ohio – ever. He will win the Heisman Trophy. He said this when Joe was in Middle School! Lindy was creative, smart, playful, funny, fun and a joy to be with. He was a devote Republican – reminding me always of the great values of the Republican Party. He never missed a moment sharing the best of his beloved party. But he stopped talking about his party in 2016. He loved his whole family and had friends everywhere – many of whom he outlived by 90 years old. I miss him every day.

**Wilbert Willoughby (Bill) Boden** died in Idaho in July with his beloved Alice and his family by his side. He was 86 years old. But Bill was Ohio born and bred. He grew up on a farm in Hilliard, Ohio
but he and his family were active members at First Church from the age of 6. He and his family were dedicated members of the First Congregational Church on Broad Street, Columbus, Ohio. Bill joined the children’s choir at age 6 and he discovered he had a talent and love of singing. This stayed with him his whole life (singing in the First Church Choir until he was 73) as well as glee clubs and quartets, and then continued in Hailey, Idaho with the Caritas Chorale – after he and Alice moved to be closer to their children and grandchildren. Bill was kind, gentle, thoughtful, positive, loving and truly funny. As a school counselor in Bexley and through the years as an educator, Bill influenced so many lives, so well and so positively, and he learned that from the pulpit of First Church. The Rev. Dr. Boynton Merrill was his inspiration in life. He even attended seminary for a year because Boynton Merrill encouraged him to do it.

**Dr. Charles (Chuck) Drummond** was active at First Church for many years. He was an avid Buckeyes fan and even after he retired to Florida, he would return each Autumn for games and worship. He was a professor of Glass Science in the Ceramic Engineering and Material Science Departments for 36 years. He was beloved by his students and was honored with the outstanding teaching award by the students in the College of Engineering. He was a great baker, too. He was legendary for his pies and cakes – even perfecting perfect, tricky pie crusts. This week when talking with Robert, his life partner of 45 years, Rob told me that they celebrated their “last day on earth” together 15 years ago. They had the greatest day that day. And it good they did that because Chuck’s last day on earth was awful. Rob encouraged me to encourage you to celebrate your last day on earth before it arrives. Don’t wait. Do it now.
Helen Rosalind Stephens Spears. Helen was 96 years young when the Lord received her as a jewel in His crown. She loved life and art and all of us. When we remembered her in a service here on October 20, I lifted up her amazing kindness and gentleness. She was active here for more than 45 years – including her active participation in Book Studies, Bible Studies, travels to the Holy Land, Deacons, Music Minister Search Committee, and Art Committee – to name a few. We will all remember her quiet, calm voice which always called us to do better and be better. It’s true. That’s the way she lived. I was blessed to call her my friend – as were many of us here.

George West – I will remember George sitting with you (Gary) in worship every Sunday for the five years we were blessed to be together. George was active in life and church long before we knew him here. He was also an active freemason and a leader in the movement. A Canadian by birth, George was joyful, fun, loving, and kind. He served in the Canadian Army and was a veteran who we thank recognize today. He was a proud Canadian. He was curious and loved exploring and learning about the world. He was a life long learner and a truly amazing man. I never knew him to be without a smile and joyful spirit. I never knew him before 90 – but I also never knew him to be without joy.

I ask all the families of those I have mentioned here to rise in remembrance now – whether at home or here. Thanks be to God for your beloved ones!

Author Frederick Buechner writes, “In God’s holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.” You see, it’s God’s business to make saints – not ours. We can do all the declaring we want. But’s God’s work is to show us the way of
amazing grace and love and to drop these delicate handkerchiefs into our lives. The saints of God are real. They are not imaginary friends. They are real people.

And today, we push back the unimaginable just a bit and we remember them again – our loved ones. We remember them. They were ordinary men and women whose love of God led them to become extraordinary men and women. They are here with us now. They are here in Spirit. I feel them. All of these 12 saints of God have touched our lives and we say together – Thanks be to God! Amen.