SERMON for Sunday, November 5, 2006
Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-6, John 11:32-44
All Saints' Day

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I Have Called You By Name

I grew up in a mostly Catholic neighborhood, in a place where there were lots of kids. Religion wasn't mentioned much, except in a matter-of-fact way. Every Friday, the smell of fish cooking wafted from kitchen windows, the dark smudge on foreheads was common after early morning mass on Ash Wednesday, the common dilemma of what to give up for Lent was a favorite discussion for weeks before that holy season began, for the choice of bubble gum or ice cream or candy from the corner store was excruciating. The family that lived in the apartment downstairs from ours was a part of the local parish, St. Michael's. Kathy, the girl nearest me in age, and I would walk the six blocks downtown, to head to the library or to squander our allowance at the Woolworth's five-and-ten cent store. Occasionally we would pass a priest or nun of St. Michael's on the sidewalk, and my friend would say, *Good morning, sister*. The nun would reply, *Good morning, Kathleen*. And I would think, *Wow, to be greeted by name by the holy sister*. So every once in a while I would try it, when I wasn't with Kathy. So as I passed a nun, I would respectfully say, *Good afternoon, sister*. To which she would reply, probably thinking I went to St. Michael's School, too, and she just had a momentary lapse in memory, *Good afternoon, dear*. Not quite *Shirley*, but *dear* was close enough. She recognized me, acknowledged my existence, and I felt that if she did, then God did, too.

As Kathy approached junior high, she brought me into the decision of what saint's name she should take for her confirmation. The concept was a foreign one to me, and I thought she was the luckiest girl I knew. Remember, in junior high, everyone wants to change their name to something far more glamorous and elegant than the plain one their parents gave them. Kathleen and all the others on the block had a golden opportunity, for at confirmation they would choose an additional name for the record. Oh, she would still be Kathleen, but the middle name might be Bridget, or Melanie, or the exotic Sofia. Notice how the names might just be similar to a movie star, having nothing to do with good deeds. And boys could choose, too, and add the tough-sounding Maximus or Tremorus to Bobby or Billy or Eddie. I got caught up in this, and dreamt about what my holy name might be if only I weren't stuck in the local Presbyterian Sunday School.

So what's in a name? If you check the website of the Social Security Administration, you can track the top names in the United States for each of the last one hundred and fifty years. Emily was the top in 2005, followed by Emma and Madison for girls, Jacob, Michael and Joshua for boys. Fifty years ago it was James, Robert and John, and Linda, Mary, and Patricia. Every once in a while we will hear a name, and will say, *I haven't heard that name in a long time!*

Today is a day about names, a day in which we will name aloud those of this congregation who have died since last November All Saints' Day. This is a day when we want to remember them, and to let their families know that we remember them, we remember them by name. And to each of you here who have experienced the death of someone you have loved, either of this congregation or another, or perhaps no congregation, we know that following a death it is a journey of grief and sadness and turmoil, a journey of tears and anger and new emotions altogether. It is also a

journey of remembering, when through family stories and pictures, through memorial gifts and times at the cemetery, through your personal journals and paging through scrapbooks, you have kept the name of your dear one close. And yet I dare say that you have also gone into uncharted emotional territory, the fear that somehow your memory will begin to fade.

We all share that fear, the fear that their name, that our name will not be remembered, that no matter how much we do to inscribe names in permanent ways sooner or later our names will be part of history. And that is true, except for the few among us who will have books on library shelves with our name as author, or for those whose future generations will include expert genealogists. Our names will fade away, lost on the Social Security most popular list, lost among the similar names of our ethnic origin, lost simply by virtue of years. In Nicholas Sparks' novel, *The Notebook*, a story of an older couple traveling through the disease of Alzheimer's based on his grandparents' lives, the subject of forgetting is faced head on when the stricken wife Allie writes to her husband Noah, *Please don't be angry with me on days I do not remember you, and we both know they will come. Know that I love you, that I always will, and that no matter what happens, know I have led the greatest life possible. My life with you.*

What is it that we remember today? It is really not about our names, or the names of our loved ones...any more than the greeting of the priest could have made my day more holy, or the addition of a saint's name at confirmation secures a place in the kingdom for young Catholic children, or the reading aloud of a name makes the journey of grief any easier. What we remember today is the promise of God to remember us, to call us by name, to call us not to death but to eternal life. It is a promise that Mary and Martha had a hard time dealing with when their brother Lazarus died. As we read in the gospel of John, Mary was convinced that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus' death. If only, if only, if only Jesus had come to the village of Bethany, to their house a bit earlier, the man would have not have succumbed but still be alive. Echoes of this conversation turn around and around in our heads when we deal with the finality of death – *all the if only's*, of earlier tests and treatments, of greater sensitivity, of good deeds left undone, of conversations not had and words to be taken back, of miracles that never seemed to happen on a human timetable, of prayers that we thought went unanswered. *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* And all the friends who had gathered to support and help Mary and Martha in their distress didn't get it either. *If Jesus could open the eyes of the blind man, couldn't he keep Lazarus from dying?*

The promise of Resurrection life told in the raising of Lazarus, foreshadowing Jesus' own Resurrection, is not the promise to cure illness. Jesus doesn't promise that there will be no weeping – after all, John 11:34 is often quoted as the shortest verse in the Bible, when Jesus shared his own love and sorrow for a one dear friend, *Jesus wept*. Jesus doesn't promise that there will not be death. Lazarus had already been dead for four days, wrapped in cloths, in a tomb sealed by a stone, stinking to high heaven. Contemporary Jewish belief of that time held that the soul of the dead remained in the vicinity of the body for three days, so by emphasizing four days the gospel writer is reminding the reader that Lazarus was truly dead and Jesus did not promise any earthly death protection. Quite the contrary. We are all going to die, our bodies will, from some disease or accident or old age. Neither we nor Jesus changes that. Our names will be forgotten in the ongoing flow of time and human history. But when Jesus walks with Mary and Martha to the tomb, Jesus arrives with something far better than any permanent etching of the name Lazarus on the rock. Jesus

arrives with new life for Lazarus, with new life for your loved ones, with new life for you and for me, and for the world. He calls Lazarus' name, and Lazarus awakens to a new and eternal life. Lazarus is unbound from the wrappings of death by the healing love of Jesus. Lazarus is transformed and liberated to a new future where, as we are promised in Revelation, *Death will be no more*.

This morning we will read the names of those of this congregation who have died this past year. When we have completed that list, I will invite you to speak aloud – at random and in no particular order – the name of any loved one or a member of this community or the wider community, nickname or first name or first and last names, anyone you would like to remember who has died not only this past year but any time. I hope that we will name our family members. I hope that we will name friends who have been dear to us. I hope that we will name those who have made a contribution to peace in the world. I hope that we will name the children of Africa, and the soldiers of the United States, of Iraq, of all nations. I hope that we will name the countless victims of hunger and poverty and hopelessness. And in so naming, we will remember all the saints, who are named before God, but whom God knows from the beginning of all time and long after our earthly names are forgotten.

When we sing, *From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host*..... Just imagine people of all sizes and ages, all races and nationalities, all sexual orientations and families of every configuration, people who are might lean to the right politically and those who might lean to the left, those who hold different religious perspectives...now in God's own glorious kingdom. Just imagine, people no longer separated by differences, hampered by disease and disability, crippled by anger and fear...now in God's own glorious kingdom. Just imagine the voice of God, *I have called you by name, and you are mine*. Just imagine.....*singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Alleluia*. Amen.