

“A Sacred Circle”

Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson

John 11:32-44 with Revelation 21:1-6a

November 3, 2024—All Saints’ Sunday

In her book *The Amen Effect*, Rabbi Sharon Brous describes an ancient Jewish ritual:

During the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the faithful who had traveled for the festival would ascend to the Temple Mount and enter the courtyard. En masse, the crowd would turn to the right and circle the courtyard. Thousands of pilgrims would plod the path along the porticos, moving counterclockwise until they’d closed the circuit. Everyone who’d made the journey to Jerusalem would turn right upon entering the complex—everyone, that is, except the brokenhearted.

Those who were suffering—the grieving, the lonely, the sick—those whose hearts hung heavy would enter the courtyard and turn left, instead. They’d make the circuit in the opposite direction. “Just as we do when we’re hurting,” Rabbi Brous explains, “... every step, against the current.” And every person who passed the brokenhearted would pause and ask, “What happened? What’s your story?”

I lost my mother; I miss her so much.

Or, my husband left.

Perhaps they’d respond, *I found a lump. Or, our son is sick. Or, I just feel so lonely.*

And those who walked from right to left would look into the eyes of the bereft and bereaved, the downcast and despairing, and offer a blessing:

May God comfort you.

May you know peace.

May you be wrapped in the embrace of community.

“There is a timeless wisdom in entering the sacred circle,” Rabbi Brous writes as she reflects upon this practice. “This ancient pilgrimage ritual has taught me the transformative nature of showing up ... [It has taught me the power] of listening deeply to each other’s pain even when we fear there are no words. Of grieving and rejoicing together, and recognizing that even though we can’t heal each other, we can *and we must* see each other.”¹

¹ Sharon Brous, *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World* (New York, Avery, 2024), pp. 3-6.

This familiar narrative from the Gospel of John tells the story of a community that shows up, of a community that grieves together, of a community that embraces the bereft and bereaved.

Of course, most of us would not describe this story in that way. We'd refer to it as the Raising of Lazarus, focusing on the most dramatic plot point, even though the Gospel writer devotes thirty-seven verses to everything that happens before Jesus even reaches the tomb and only two verses to the actual act of resurrection. Some of us best remember this story for its most quotable line, which comes from Jesus' conversation with Martha: *I am the resurrection and the life*. But most of us do not think of John chapter 11 as a story about the transformative power of community.

At the beginning of chapter 11, John tells us that "a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany." Worried about their brother's wellbeing, Mary and Martha send word to Jesus: "Lord," they say, "he whom you love is ill." But rather than rushing to the bedside, Jesus tarries; he stays on the other side of Jordan for two more days.

Before Jesus reaches Bethany, Lazarus dies. And the community of faith shows up. John tells us that many come from Jerusalem to console Mary and Martha. The sacred circle surrounds these grieving sisters, wrapping the bereft and bereaved in the embrace of community. They may not be able to offer healing, but they know the power of listening deeply to another's pain. So, the community of faith gathers to grieve.

It *is* timeless wisdom: Even though we can't heal each other, we can *and we must* see each other.

The one who is conspicuously absent from the circle is Jesus. When he finally arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. Each sister goes out to meet Jesus on the road—first Martha, then Mary. And *each* of them laments his failure to come more promptly: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Martha and Mary know that Jesus—the One who'd healed a little boy on the brink of death; the One who'd commanded a paralytic to take up his mat and walk; the One who'd opened the eyes of a man born blind—Martha and Mary know that Jesus can offer

healing. And they believe that, if Jesus had been there, Lazarus would be alive. They *know* that, if Jesus had only been at the deathbed, Lazarus would be alive.

But, had the story gone that way, Martha and Mary and all the rest of us may *not* have known a deeper truth: that Jesus joins us in our grief.

When we pick up this story at verse 32, Jesus is still on the road; he has not yet reached the sisters' home or the tomb where Lazarus lies. Martha comes to greet him, and Jesus assures her: *I am the resurrection and the life.*

And now, Mary stands before Jesus. Actually, she *kneels* before Jesus. As soon as she meets him on the road, she crumples at his feet and weeps. And by John's account, Jesus is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." He sees Mary crying; he sees her friends crying. He sees their pain, their heartache, their loss. And Jesus weeps alongside them.

Of course, the Messiah knows how this will end. He has known ever since he received word that Lazarus was ill. Jesus knows that this story will end with rejoicing, that those gathered at the tomb will see the glory of God, that Lazarus will be restored to life and to his community's embrace. Jesus knows that the resurrection of Lazarus will foreshadow his own resurrection, when all creation will see that the death-dealing powers of this world are no match for God. Jesus knows that sorrow will ultimately turn to joy, that mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

The Messiah knows how this will end. But he stays fully present in the moment. He stands on the road and weeps. He joins the sacred circle that surrounds Mary and Martha because he knows the power of grieving together. He knows the power of looking into the eyes of the brokenhearted and blessing them with the gift of presence. He especially knows the power of God Incarnate, the Word-made-Flesh, joining us in our grief.

So, before he reaches the tomb of Lazarus, he stops on the road. He stands with those who weep, waiting between promise and fulfillment, between death and resurrection, between despair and hope. And he invites us to stand there, too—to form a sacred circle, to wrap those who grieve in the embrace of community.

When Jesus and Mary and Martha and all the rest finally gather at the tomb, the Messiah shows this grieving community how this will end. Jesus orders the stone rolled away.

Then, he cries out with a loud voice: “Lazarus, come out!” And, as the resurrected man emerges from the grave—his hands and feet still bound, his face still wrapped in cloth—this sacred circle sees the glory of God. In this moment, they see what the world will come to know later: that Jesus is, in fact, the Resurrection and the Life. In this moment, their despair turns to blazing joy. Alleluia!

But that is not the end of the story—not quite. Jesus does one more thing before he leaves the tomb of Lazarus. He gives the community a command: “Unbind him,” he says. “Unbind him, and let him go.” Jesus orders this sacred circle—those who have surrounded these grieving sisters, who have wrapped the bereft and bereaved in the embrace of community—Jesus orders them now to *unwrap* the graveclothes, to free Lazarus from the trappings of death. That is their final and enduring charge: to continue the work of resurrection, to shepherd Lazarus into new life.

This, it would seem, is part of being a sacred circle—a community that knows the transformative power of showing up, of grieving and rejoicing together; a community that can hold one another’s sorrow and, also, point toward healing and hope; a community that will walk with the brokenhearted as they take halting steps toward the new life ahead.

A few months ago, I listened to an interview with a Presbyterian pastor named Kelly Kaufman who spoke of the ways her community had surrounded her after the death of her seven-year-old daughter.² Maggie died in March so, at the time of this interview, the family’s grief remained raw, searing; they were still—to use Rabbi Brous’ words—pressing forward, “every step against the current.” But, even from a place of deep sorrow, Kelly was able to name the transformative power of being part of a sacred circle.

After Maggie’s death, the Kaufmans’ community did not look away. Rather, they looked into the eyes of their brokenhearted friends and offered blessing after blessing. The morning after Maggie died, the first text Kelly received came from a neighbor: “Hey,” she said, “Your house is going to be busy today. I’m stopping by Panera and I’m getting coffee, bagels, and muffins to feed people.” The coffee and pastries appeared. And, soon after, so did the community—friends and neighbors coming to console the Kaufmans about their daughter. Many of these friends were Maggie’s, of course. Just the day before, she’d been making fairy houses in her front yard with kids

² See: Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silvers, hosts, “The Nuanced Life: The Power of Community,” Pantsuit Politics (podcast), August 16, 2024, www.pantsuitpoliticsshow.com.

from the neighborhood. So, on this sad day, the children gathered on the lawn again. And, by the end of the day, the Kaufmans' front yard was covered with fairy houses and daffodils, Maggie's favorite flower.

In the following weeks, the Kaufmans' mailbox was flooded with messages of comfort and care. Every day Kelly would light a candle and read the cards. Some people found a beautiful sympathy card and simply signed their names; others shared memories of Maggie; each and every one was a blessing. Kelly's favorite came from a little boy in the neighborhood; it was written to her son, Maggie's brother. "Dear Calvin," he wrote, "I'm sorry to hear about your sister. That's got to be really hard. And I bet you're sad. But I bet that's not what you want to talk about right now." And then he wrote another page and a half about Minecraft and drama and school. And, at the end, he said: "Mom says you can come to my house anytime. Here's her number. Let me know if you want company."

But one of the most powerful things this community has done for the Kaufmans has been sharing stories about Maggie's impact on their lives. One mom in the neighborhood mentioned how her daughter was anxious about starting a new school. She was really nervous on the first day ... Until Maggie walked up to this little girl and grabbed her by the hand and said, "Let me show you school." And Maggie's teachers shared how—every single day—Maggie would give them a hug and say, "I love you."

This community has formed a sacred circle to offer blessing to a brokenhearted family. They are looking the Kaufmans in the eyes and seeing them in their sorrow. Because this community knows the power of showing up, of grieving together. They know the power of standing with the bereft and bereaved in the space between promise and fulfillment, between death and resurrection, between despair and hope. They have wrapped the Kaufmans in the embrace of community. And, in doing so, they are even helping to *unwrap* the trappings of death. They are helping the Kaufmans move through an impossible grief, toward peace, toward hope—shepherding them into new life.

In a sense, that is what we are doing on this All Saints' Sunday. We are coming together to enter into a sacred circle, to look one another in the eye and offer a blessing:

May God comfort you.

May you know peace.

May you be wrapped in the embrace of community.

Some of us, like Kelly Kaufman, carry grief that is impossibly fresh; we find ourselves on the ragged edges of life, still taking every step against the current. Some of us know that time dulls the ragged edges. But, even after years or decades, grief never lifts completely. Many of us do not count ourselves among the brokenhearted, the bereft, the bereaved. But, still, we are mourning other things—the fragility of life, the division in our country, the chaos of the world. And, so, I expect, we all enter this sacred circle hoping to receive a blessing as well.

And the good news is this: This, too, is a community that knows the power of grieving and rejoicing together. Today we do both: grieving the loss of saints who have joined the church triumphant in the past year; rejoicing that these saints now dwell eternally with God, where there is neither mourning nor crying nor pain. The good news is that this, too, is a community that knows the power of showing up, of being present to one another, of weeping with those who grieve and pointing toward healing and hope. We do that because we are a community centered in Christ—the One who is the resurrection and the life. And we *can* do that because Christ is here, standing with us in the space between promise and fulfillment, between death and resurrection, between despair and hope. For we know that, in Christ, not even death can separate us from the love of God. And, in faith, we will move forward together into the new and abundant life Christ promises.