



**"Our Saints"**

**Scripture – John 11:32-44**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, November 7, 2021**

Have you seen the Tom Hanks' movie "Greyhound?" Camilla and I watched it recently and found it gripping. I have to confess that, when I first heard the title, I assumed it was either a story about the challenges and adventures of a Greyhound Bus driver or perhaps a film exposing the dark side of dog racing. Well, I missed by a mile.

"Greyhound" is a ship and Hanks is its commander. It is 1942, the early days of the Second World War for the United States. Merchant ship convoys carrying desperately needed supplies and troops to Europe must cross the Atlantic. They are easy targets for German submarines.

Hanks is naval commander of *Greyhound*, a Fletcher-class destroyer. He is in charge of the four destroyers who are escorting 37 merchant ships to England. It is his first war-time assignment.

For the first segment of the trip, U.S. planes accompany the convoy from overhead – ready to spot and destroy enemy subs. For the last segment of the trip, British planes will take over this task. However, there is a 48-hour period in the middle of the Atlantic that is out of range of aircraft. This is the most dangerous part of the voyage, and this section of the Atlantic is known as the "Black Pit." In this plane-free zone, the German subs have the upper hand and pride themselves on sending allied ships to a watery grave. So it is inevitable that everyone on every ship in the convoy is on edge during this two-day period, aware that a torpedo could blast a hole in their hull any minute.

Shortly after entering the Black Pit, the crew of the Greyhound detects German transmissions. Enemy submarines are stalking them. Suddenly, a sub is spotted and Greyhound destroys it with depth charges. The crew is ecstatic; they cheer their success.

However, the celebration is cut short. One of the merchant ships near the rear of the convoy is torpedoed by a different sub and is sinking quickly. Greyhound rushes to scoop survivors out of the water, but there are only a handful of men to be plucked from the icy ocean.

Word comes that there is a German wolf pack of six submarines just out of firing range. Hanks suspects they are waiting for nightfall before attacking. Sure enough, when the darkness envelops them, the assault begins. One of the merchant ships is torpedoed and begins to sink. Then another and another. The action is fast and

frightening. The subs launch multiple torpedo runs. They target Greyhound. Hanks barks commands to maneuver the ship in various directions and the ship barely evades being struck.

I won't tell you any more about the film other than it is based on history, but it drives home the fear and the courage-in-the-face-of-death of these young men who went to war to stop the march of fascism.

Why ponder this story on All Saints' Sunday? Not only because Veterans Day is this week, but because one of my saints, my father, was on a Destroyer Escort in the Atlantic hunting German subs during World War II. Watching this movie was the first time I truly understood the perils of what my father faced when he was a young man serving in the U.S. Navy.

Like many in his generation, he only shared a few snippets of his wartime experience, and those stories were always the humorous ones, not the harrowing ones. I regret not pushing my dad to tell me more about his life – not only his wartime experience, but his childhood during the Great Depression, his early work days struggling to make ends meet, his hopes, his dreams, how his faith carried him through difficult times, and how I made his job of parenting so easy by being such a totally delightful child! Thank you Dad, for not giving up on me.

I wish I would have expressed my appreciation to him much more than I did: for providing for all of my needs, for setting the example of treating every person with dignity and respect, for the discipline he applied when I veered off course, for taking me to church, for coming to my games, for words of encouragement when I needed a boost.

Today we plunge into our memory banks to recall the special people in our lives who helped us along the way. We have the photos of many of them hanging from the communion table and the ends of the pews. These are the ones who wept with us when we wept and rejoiced with us when we rejoiced. They showed us love in action and inspired us to aim higher. These are some of our saints.

Often when people use the word saint, they are talking about people who are in the same league with Mother Teresa and Francis of Assisi. When Roman Catholics speak of saints, they refer to a list of specific individuals who lived extraordinarily virtuous lives and have been canonized by the church. Protestants think of saints differently.

While we acknowledge that there have been remarkable individuals who made God's Global All-Star team, we name *all* followers of Jesus "saints." We take our cue from the New Testament. In some of the Apostle Paul's letters, he refers to everyone in a congregation as a "saint." Thus, it is not only those who are stained-glass window material. Everyone who strives to live a Jesus-focused life can be called a saint.

I urge you to bring into your consciousness, some of the people who have been saints for you: those special people who made you feel loved and who showed you *how* to love. Recall the virtues you spotted in them and how they became your model. Can you picture someone who showed you how to extend kindness? Someone who exemplified courage?

No one looks up the word kindness, attaches the meaning to his brain, then begins being kind to others. We do not digest the definition of courage and then begin acting bravely. We see someone act with kindness and we copy her. We see someone who is courageous and we try to muster that same intrepid spirit.

Today we focus our thoughts on those people who serve as our models. Think for a moment: Who planted within you a desire to be trustworthy? Can you remember someone who made you want to become generous?

When we remember the saints of our lives, it might produce tears. It is a sign of our love and a reminder of our loss. Somewhere in our conscious or subconscious mind it is also a reminder of our own mortality.

Today's scripture reading reminds us that our physical existence reaches an end point. And when it does, friends and loved ones grieve. Lazarus dies and his sisters grieve his death. But not only do Mary and Martha shed tears for their brother, friends also mourn his death. And when Jesus arrives, we find that the one who is our best revelation of God – our portal into the nature of God – also weeps. It is a very poignant scene.

It is especially surprising to find this story in the Gospel of John. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we find a Jesus who is described in more human terms. He is a Jesus to whom we can relate. However, the Gospel of John, written later than the other three, constantly speaks of Jesus in such divine terms – in control of every situation, forecasting the future, and speaking of himself in godlike language – that we can see why many in the ancient church claimed Jesus was divine, but not human. However, it is *here*, in John's gospel, that we read of Jesus doing the most human thing: crying over the loss of his good friend.

As our foremost revelation of God, Jesus makes known the pathos of God. God is not the detached observer at a distance. God feels our pain and knows our grief, and walks with us through the darkest valleys.

But there is more to this story than sadness. "Lazarus, come out!" It is a reminder that physical death is not the end of existence. It is a story pointing beyond this life to something more.

And so the tears that fill our eyes when we remember our saints – their face, their touch, their voice – is justified grief, validated by no other than Jesus. But it is neither the overwhelming grief of despair, nor the cynicism of gloom. It is sorrow mixed with gratitude. It is heartache comingled with hope. We have lost our saints for a time, but not forever. One day we will gather with our saints. We will gather with our saints at the river – the river that flows by the throne of God.

### **The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

Eternal God –  
who welcomes us to the table,  
who invites us to join the saints at the feast,  
who surrounds us with so great a cloud of witnesses –  
you are our hope and our salvation!  
From generation to generation, your faithfulness is sure.

You are the One who claimed our ancestors –  
calling upon shepherds to lead your people,  
anointing kings to keep your flock.  
You are the One who dwelled among us –  
sending the Word-made-flesh to heal our brokenness,  
pouring out grace abundant through this, your Son.  
You are the One who sustained the faithful of every age –  
inspiring teachers and disciples, seekers and priests,  
empowering parents and grandparents to share your love.

Generous God,  
By your grace, we have these gifts to share.  
So, with thanksgiving, we come to this table,  
taking our place beside saints of ages past,  
to share one bread and one cup –  
the fruit of your creation,  
that unites us with the faithful of every time and place.

On this All Saints' Sunday,  
we remember with joy the saints of our lives,  
who have done justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly with you,  
and we name them before you now ...

~ Names of the Westminster saints are read ~

We give thanks for these, your beloved children,  
who have joined the church triumphant,  
and dwell with you in your everlasting kingdom.  
With thanksgiving, we remember these sisters and brothers in Christ,  
and praise you for the gift of their lives –  
for all in them that was good and kind and faithful,  
for the ways they bore witness to your love.

With gratitude and anticipation,  
we come to this table, which is bound neither by time nor place,  
to join these sisters and brothers at the feast  
which you have prepared for us.

Gracious God, pour out your Spirit upon us  
and upon these gifts of bread and cup.  
Draw us together into one body,  
and join us to Christ and the communion of saints.  
Unite us in faith, encourage us with hope, inspire us to love,  
that we may serve as your faithful disciples  
until we feast at your table in glory.

We lift this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ,  
and join our voices as one as we offer the prayer he taught us:

**“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.”**