

Introduction: Good morning, and welcome to Chapel. My name is Kerry Kuehn; I serve in the Physics Department here at Wisconsin Lutheran College.

Overview: Today, on the First day of November, we celebrate All Saints Day. On All Saints Day (or all hallows day), we Christians who are still living on earth remember the dead who gone before us and who have died in the Lord.

The text we will focus on is from Paul's letter to the Galatians (Chapter 5) in which he reminds the Galatian Christians of the freedom that they have. Specifically: "Freedom from sin is life in the spirit."

For our liturgy, we will be using the order of General Devotion on page twenty one in your white service bulletin. After the invocation, a handbell duet will provide a musical offering.

Invocation: In the name of the father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen

Lesson (Galatians 5:1, 13-25):

The line separating life and death is razor sharp, and extremely thin.

Perhaps a year ago, during the bright green days of summer, my three daughters decided to sell raspberries. They harvested raspberries from the prickly bushes behind our old garage. They put them into plastic cups. They drew up a brightly colored sign proclaiming "fresh raspberries." They pulled up little lawn chairs, and there they sat by the sidewalk waiting for passers-by. Things were going well—my kids were sitting in a little row quietly talking amongst themselves between business transactions—until it happened.

A squirrel attempted to make a risky leap, apparently, between two high branches above the raspberry stand. It plummeted from I don't know how high, and landed with a loud "swack" on the sidewalk just to the left of the raspberry stand. I saw this happen from up the driveway a bit.

My children watched in horror as the squirrel thrashed about for about a half a minute before finally dying. We decided to get a shovel, scoop him up, and bury him by the raspberry bushes. And so we did, and then the kids went back to selling raspberries, more somberly. It was probably the first time my children had seen a cute animal die.

I suspect that the lives of squirrels, and other animals for that matter, are filled with anxiety and fear. Have you ever watched a little rabbit? They are adorable little animals, but they typically look afraid. Like things could go south at any moment: a dog could suddenly snatch them, or a hawk could swoop down and lift away their children.

I suspect that rabbits live, for the most part, in a state of existential fear. This may even be why we find them adorable: we can relate to them. Somewhere, deep down, we can empathize with the existential fear that the rabbit experiences. For us, too, things could go south at any moment.

Anxiety, depression, and fear are normal human emotions. Some philosophers and psychologists, in fact, point out that the questions we ask shouldn't really be "why is this person so full of anxiety?" or "Why is that person depressed?" These emotions do not really need explaining. They are the obvious, normal, responses to existence in a fallen world.

Perhaps what really needs explaining is why anyone would be well-adjusted, complacent, happy, and calm. Here on earth corruption and death do wait for each of us. As we get older, it becomes increasingly clear that the line between life and death is razor sharp, and extremely thin.

Most cultures have customs, traditions, or celebrations that date back centuries (or even millennia) and which bring to mind the proximity and inevitability of death. These traditions raise the haunting question: what happens to the soul after death? This concern is as rational as it is universal. And here is an important point to recognize: such rational and universal concerns provide a point of contact between the Christian and the non-Christian.

Even in the Americas, today, there are traditions that evoke the proximity of death. On Halloween people dress up as skeletons or ghosts. Now it is true that in our societies, the traditions surrounding All Saints Day—or All Hallows Day—have changed from the thoughtful to the macabre, and from the macabre to the downright silly. Nonetheless today, on all All Saints Day, we Christians will do well to remember that the veil separating Heaven and Earth is extremely thin.

This is clear whenever we recite the apostle's creed. In this, our baptismal creed, we proclaim that we believe in the Communion of Saints. What is the Communion of Saints? The Communion of Saints is the coming together of all the Saints, both the living and the dead.

And who are the Saints? The Saints are those—both the living and the dead—who have faith that Jesus Christ died for their sins, and that he rose from the dead to prove to the world that he is indeed the Son of God who has power over death.

This, by the way, is the simple and true message that was proclaimed by Luther and the other reformers five hundred years ago. It is the simple and true message that the Apostle Paul proclaimed to the Galatian Christians who were beginning to believe a different Gospel, which he says is no Gospel at all.

Like during Luther's time, and like during our time, the Galatians were being taught by false teachers that Christ's death on the cross was not quite enough. It was a good start, but to *earn* our Father's love, we must *shape up!* We must watch our step. We must look busy; we must *stay* busy. Maybe we should wonder if our Father truly wants to spend time with us. Maybe, we are not really his beloved children....

It is precisely because of these false teachings that Paul wrote as follows to the Galatians:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

He is referring, of course, to the slavery of works-righteousness: the false teaching that we must *earn* the love of our Father. Paul goes on to write that

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out, or you will be destroyed by each other.

Notice, here, Paul's concern for the Communion of Saints. He did not want their unity in the faith, their Communion, to be broken. So, he says:

...live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of your sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the spirit, and the spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with one another, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the spirit, you are not under the law.

Paul is addressing the saints who are still here on Earth. We on Earth are the saints who still struggle against sin. But remember the Communion of Saints!

There are Christians from every tribe and every language who are now in heaven, just on the other side of that thin bright veil. They are the Saints Triumphant! They, in many ways, are more alive, even, than we are. Why? Because they no longer struggle with the sinful nature. What is the sinful nature? How is it known? Paul writes:

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

This warning of Paul's is not a threat (as if sin could separate us from the love of Christ.) Rather it is a pastoral reminder of who the Galatians are. And it is a reminder of who we are.

We are children of God: that part of the Communion of Saints who are not yet in heaven. And while we may see other Christians with sinful vices, and while we ourselves struggle with sinful vices, the Saints who are in heaven do not.

For the Saints in heaven, there is no impurity, no debauchery, no discord, no selfish ambition, no dissensions, no factions, no envy. They are finally free to fully display what they were always meant to be. Remember this! By remembering the Communion of Saints, we can remember who we are. We can be encouraged to live according to the spirit. Paul writes:

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the spirit, let us keep in step with the spirit.

Today, on All Saints Day, let us remember the Communion of Saints. And let us remember the freedom that we have: a freedom from sin that we have not earned, but which we have been given—as a gift from our Father in Heaven.

Please rise for prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Blessing: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. **Amen**