

“Ready to Shine”

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This week, the Western Suburbs were rocked with the news of the violent murder of 14 year old Kelli Joy O’Laughlin. A life stolen. A tragic loss to the community, and to the world.

In response, the members of the Western Springs community have come together, tying white ribbons around the trees that line the neighborhood. Up and down each street, those white ribbons wave in the autumn wind.

My friend Katherine serves First Congregational Church of Western Springs, and she writes, “The sight of all those ribbons is devastating and moving. Each one evokes the memory of a girl named Kelli Joy. Each one bears testimony to our shared horror at her death. Each one cries out for justice to be done. And each one silently proclaims that this community refuses to let fear and violence prevail.

We will be a hopeful community, despite our grief. A trusting community, despite the loss of our innocence. A loving community, despite our rage. We will not forsake this beautiful heartbreaking imperfect world, or let the incursion of evil convince us that life is anything but a profoundly sacred gift.”

We have each been given a profoundly sacred gift in the gift of life. Each of us has just a short time to live out the days we have been given, attempting to make meaning from the hours that span our existence.

This All Saints Sunday, we are called to remember the saints in our midst who have gone on ahead. Those faithful folks who inspire us to move forward in faith. Because, while many might declare that their faith is a personal, private matter, the truth is that we do not come to full understanding of God or God’s will for us on our own.

It is in the life of community that we come to deeper understanding of the scriptures and stories, the mysteries of faith and, the true costs and joys of discipleship.

We do not walk this journey as individuals, but surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have offered their insight and understanding, their story and example, their very lives as a lasting reminder that God’s story continues through us.

Can you think of a saint who has brought you to this time and place in your life? Maybe you would name a Sunday School teacher, or a previous pastor, or even a friend or neighbor who invited you to church one day.

Who has encouraged you? Guided you? Offered you friendship and fellowship along the way?

We each hold stories in our hearts of those who have served as examples of faith in our lives.

Today, we give thanks for the gift of each story, each memory, each life that we hold dear.

And perhaps, we too, are called to question our own mortality, and to ask, what are the memories, the stories, the truths that will live on, when we are gone from this world?

The Psalmist writes, *we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.*

⁶*that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children,*

⁷*so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments;*

It has been widely lamented that this generation is not as interested as those of the past in attending church regularly, or even naming themselves as religious.

And yet we, as people of faith, continue to tell of the glorious deeds of the Lord, and those words are being heard.

Last night, over 20 of our young people slept outside on the church grounds in solidarity with, and to raise awareness of the homeless population of DuPage County. This afternoon, our middle school youth will embark on a door-to-door campaign to raise food items for Mission:1, adding to the collection we've already started here in the sanctuary.

The legacy of St. Peter's church as a mission church runs deep. We are passing on our understanding of service as an essential component of faith to the next generation and to the next.

We are instilling the idea that life is a profoundly sacred gift. Each life. Every life. Whether that life shines brightly and boldly on the world stage, or lights just a small corner of a community. Whether that life was surrounded by love, comfort and care, or was marred by abuse, neglect, and pain. Each life. Every life is precious to God. Rather than white ribbons tied 'round trees, this morning we have lit candles, speaking the names of our mourned losses. Each candle that burns on this table represents the loss of a life that has touched us here in this faith community.

And yet there are so many others.

Lives that have been lost this year to the continuing wars in Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Lives that have been lost to poverty and hunger. To addiction and drug use. To drunk driving and senseless violence.

So many lives lost before their time.

As we live out the days that have been given to us, we are reminded that we do not know the day or the hour in which the Lord will return. We don't know how much time we have. What we do know is how we have been commanded to live in the meantime.

We are called to be wise, not foolish. To be prepared. To be prudent, and to understand that we do not understand the mysteries of life.

In response to the parable of the bridesmaids, Arland J. Hultgren writes, "Every person must come to terms with living in the world, the place given by God for his children, over time. For modern Christians, that includes care of the earth and making peace for the sake of future generations. It is necessary to plan for the long haul, remain faithful, be wise, and stay strong" (*The Lectionary Commentary*).

Soon we will come to share in the sacrament of communion, where we are reminded that we are, indeed, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. With the faithful in every place and time we praise with joy God's holy name. In our eating and drinking, in our fellowship at this table, we are connected as one.

As we partake, let us remember that our faith is not just an individual endeavor, but lived out in community and fellowship. Let us give eye to those who have gone before, and those who are yet to come, and may we live in ways that let our lives shine for the glory of God.

Amen.