

Sunday, November 1, 2015 – All Saints Sunday  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
John 11:33-44

### **In Memory, A Bell**

They thought they knew who he was, but it took a lot to be sure. They found the body on the floor of the apartment, where it had been entombed in clutter, the bindings of 70 plus years. But it had been several days since the time of death. It was the smell that alerted a neighbor, the smell that led them to unseal the tomb, to open the door and discover its occupant—but the body was no longer identifiable. They could not be sure it was the owner of the apartment.

Instances like these can require a painstaking series of steps before the body and its effects find their final resting place. They had ruled out foul play. He died alone and was alone in that death for some time, without anyone noticing for a number of days. His parents were long gone and he didn't have any siblings or children. He did have an apartment, piled high with possessions. He was a hoarder. Still, very little of what he had accumulated allowed investigators to verify who he was, not at first, nor for some time. They took fingerprints, and cross checked databases, they cold-called hospitals, they sorted through the trash, and the stench. Finally they found an old tax return, some photos, a holiday card from a woman he almost married. Slowly, following these and other leads, they discovered a history of a man who had worked as a mover until he injured his shoulder, who collected workers compensation and social security for disability, but saved much of it, along with many other less valuable things, who had friends who had been co-workers or bar mates, a man who left a good amount of money to a few people, most of whom were dead, none of whom he been in contact with for years. The man's name was George Bell.

We ring bells today in church. When I read this grim story, featured in the newspaper a few weeks ago, "The Lonely Death of George Bell," I could not help but think of what we do in church today: as we name and ring a bell for the dead.

It's a day to think about death, but also, like the story of George Bell, it can make us think about life. That's what it does for those people, the ones whose job it is to sort through apartments after a lonely death, the people who find out about the life that was there. What a strange and often awful job that must be: to see piles of empty liquor bottles, to wade through moldy take out containers, to sift through stacks of old mail: a jury duty summons that will never be filled. The work changes them, they say, makes them think about their lives. "I don't want to die alone," says one, "I make a point of being in touch with people." "Whatever material you have," says another, "share it. Share yourself." What strange and awful work that is, to go to places of death, and unwrap it, seek the life beneath it.

That's what God does, in Jesus. God becomes a human being and enters into all the mess of being human. God in Jesus uncovers what we are, seeks who we may truly be. As Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus and wept, so God goes to the tombs of our lives, and weeps. God weeps at our bindings, weeps over the things we hoard, weeps at the things we cannot let go that are sealing us into lonely caves.

What are the things you have lined your life with, which are now closing you in? It could be acquisitions: clothes and collections and toys and tools and an array of technological devices. So many of us have so much—so much more than we need—but often, instead of feeling grateful, we feel fearful. We hold what we have, tightly to ourselves, instead of opening ourselves up in generosity to and with others.

Or it could be we have too much information, too many competing claims for our attention, too many updates and text messages and emails. Too often I find myself checking my phone while I am allegedly spending with my family. My face focuses on a tiny screen, and I sequester myself in a room for one, a room inside the room that I should be in, the room with my loved ones. With what I am holding I isolate myself.

Or maybe what we are holding is something less tangible, but yet more toxic: anger, resentment, bitterness. With time, without release, these feelings seal us off from others, seal us off from life. We know that, and yet how easy, how appealing it is to hang on to such feelings—and add to them, add to our collection with new instances of the same emotion piled onto past occurrences. You are exasperated with a person, or frustrated with a situation—soon all they do, all that happens, is another thing to begrudge, another reason to never leave the little room of your own gloom. Your hurt is like an old wound that will not heal, like a shoulder injury that puts you out of work. You drink to dull the pain but it continues to ache and you are yet worse off. You hold on to the hurt, and you hurl it at others, like Mary, at the tomb of her brother Lazarus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Jesus sees her weeping, and weeps with her. Jesus knew Lazarus. “See how he loved him!” the bystanders say.

Jesus knows who we are, too. In Jesus, God takes painstaking steps to verify who we really are, to make it true, to make it right. This is done, not by demanding that we clean up our mess, but by clearing it away for us, by dying on a cross, and walking out of a tomb. In Jesus’ lonely death, God says we do not die alone. In Jesus’ resurrection, God says my work is not over. God says to each and every one of us, dead and alive, you are known by me, and you will be connected to me and to all that I love, for eternity.

We continue the work of God here, on this side of the tomb, when we take up the strange and awe-ful—the strange and awesome—work of uncovering life. This is our job, too, the gospel says. Jesus has command over the power of death; Jesus does the calling out of the tomb—and then calls us to uncover life. Ours is to be the neighbor who notices. Ours is to be reporter, who tells the story. Ours is to be the funeral director, who buries solitary bodies with dignity, saying, “We are all connected, products of the same God. Does it matter that this man should be cremated with respect? Yes it does.” Ours is to continue God’s work, for ours is a God of everlasting life, ours is a God who calls with love’s ringing voice: “Unbind him, and let him go!”