

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My commute to/from Waupun takes me through the awe-inspiring Wisconsin farmlands. The rolling hills, the brilliance of color – the sky, fields, and foliage – are breath-taking. I am in a state of wonder as I travel those rural roads between Belgium and Waupun.

Something that has caught my attention is the variety of cemeteries that dot the landscape along the roads, calling out the names of its residents, in silence and reverence. These places of final rest may contain only a dozen headstones, while others seem to be the final dwelling for hundreds of individuals. There is one place along the way in which there are two distinct cemeteries located directly across the highway from each other, being segregated only by asphalt and faith tradition.

I admit that I am curious when it comes to cemeteries, although not in a creepy way. Linda and I have explored various graveyards, seeking information about family ancestry. As we walk back and forth through the rows of monuments, it amazes me how some headstones are descriptive, while others are as mysterious as the inhabitant – such as being labeled simply as “Mother” or “Son.” Some monuments have portraits of the deceased engraved into the granite. Others are engraved with only the name, birthdate, and date of death.

And, there are still others, those made of limestone, in which the identity of the interred is slowly fading away, being erased by natural forces, ultimately relegating them into anonymity.

The grim and melancholy feelings associated with this place, and its eerie quietness, serve as a reminder of my own mortality. And yet, it also reminds me that each and every person that has been laid to rest in these places has a story. I do mean 'has' a story, not 'had' a story.

Makes me wonder: Was the person a loving parent? Did a pandemic cut their lives short? Was the person a war veteran? Did this life end at birth? Did they simply succumb to the effects of old age? Is there anyone left to retell their stories? Is there anyone left to remember them?

Although they are physically absent, I believe that their stories have been carried forward and embodied by the generations that followed. It may or may not be embodied by a relative, but no one enters and exits this life without having a story. I believe there is always someone who has been changed and formed by the life of someone else – even if their time on earth is only a moment long.

How often do we hear stories about the thriftiness of the generations that emerged from those who endured the Great Depression? We hear stories about slavery, and the generational impacts that continue to affect countless individuals.

We hear about family businesses that are handed down from one generation to the next. We hear stories about how a simple gesture of love changed the life of someone else, forever.

As a culture, we believe that we are self-made - products of our own visions and labor. Yet, I cannot deny that my story is a culmination of generations of stories, created by those who came before me. I have been formed by the struggles and successes of my ancestors, their values, their morals, their faith. I am not self-made, but rather a steward in charge of keeping the story alive. But somehow, in my humanness, I assume that my own personal story ends when I take my last breath, expecting the last entry to be, “The End.”

But is it? Isaiah tells us that the “the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.” We are told that death will be no more, and that there is something more beyond the grave. The thin shroud that separates human life and eternal life is lifted, telling me there is more to the story. It assures me that if my story lives on, that the stories of all who came before me lives on, as well. Eternal life will include the culmination of all stories ever written by our lives. And since our stories continue into eternal life, each and every one is sacred, holy. I offer you the idea that this is the Communion of Saints, those who we remember today, and their stories.

As a human, one who knows about the joy of everlasting life, I still grieve the death of a loved one. After all, their story is part of my story, too. When they die, a part of me dies, too. Even Jesus, in his humanness, grieved the death of Lazarus. “Jesus wept.” And if anyone knows about life after death, it is Jesus, yet in his humanness, he wept.

For us, death is dark. But as Jesus had the stone rolled back from Lazarus’ tomb, the light of Christ cut through the darkness, and restored life to Lazarus. Just as Jesus gave illumination to Lazarus, he can cut through our darkness with His light and give us hope and new life.

Today, we celebrate the “Communion of Saints.” The first impression is that a saint is an extraordinary person. But rather, isn’t a saint one who has a faith-filled relationship with Christ? Isn’t a saint a person who is associated with ‘holiness’? Aren’t we created in the image and likeness of God? Doesn’t that grant each of us a spark of the divine, an identity of holiness? Yes! You, and all who came before you, were created in holiness, and your story is sacred.

Do we always act in holiness? Nope! But we are created as holy beings, but do unholy things. In God’s unconditional and immeasurable love, and Jesus as our intercessor and advocate, we can be assured that our holiness will survive any failings and sin that have affected us.

I believe that when we remember our loved ones, recall their stories – those sacred stories, we ignite the light of holiness and reunite with those who have gone before us. Retelling the stories, and calling out the names of those who now dwell on the other side of the shroud, is one of the ways in which the light of Christ shines through the darkness of death, and brings renewal of life, through love.

Today, we take time to remember those who have gone before us. We seek comfort by recalling the light that they brought into our lives, and the light in which they now dwell – the light of Christ. By remembering our loved ones, we are reminded of our hope in the Resurrection, and how their light woven is into the fabric of our own lives. We are reminded that the Communion of Saints prays with us and for us. By recalling each of them by name, we bring our loved ones back into our lives, even if just for a moment. We can dwell in the comfort knowing that our loved ones are only a story away. Amen.