Our Leg of the Race
A Sermon on Revelation 7:9-17 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ November 1, 2026

Today is the first Sunday in November, the day of the 55th running of the New York City marathon. I've never run a marathon, but the New York City marathon is especially interesting to me because the runners run through many memorable places, and also because, ever since the first New York City marathon, in 1970, women have been permitted to run in the race, which was forbidden by the rules of the Amateur Athletic Union. This year, the New York City marathon is especially interesting to me because my niece will be running in it.

Today is also November 1st, All Saints Day. On this day we remember the people who have been like saints for us, people who brought some of God's grace and love into our lives. Some of them have finished their earthly journeys, a different sort of race.

Their story is told in parts of the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation is often confusing to us, but the main idea is similar to the message Jesus preaches in the Gospels. The main idea of the Book of Revelation is that Christians must not assimilate the values of the surrounding culture as their own values.

The culture around us tells us that it's a virtue to be rich, to be young, or to be beautiful or handsome. The culture around us tells us it's a virtue to be a loud person who dominates the conversation. The culture tells us it's a virtue to use your power in a way that makes others afraid of you. These are not Christian virtues. To be a Christian means to resist the temptation to assimilate these values as our own. To be a follower of Christ means to hold steadfast to the values expressed in Matthew chapter five.

Much of the Book of Revelation describes God's punishment of those who have been dishonest, cruel, and greedy. Today's passage is different. It's about those who have finished their earthly journeys and have been honest, merciful, and generous. *These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God.* Life was not always easy for them. They willingly surrendered their time, their energy, their money, their privileges, and, in different ways, their lives, in order to serve God's people with love and grace.

These are the people we remember today during our All Saints Day worship service. We remember the people who have been living examples of the Gospel message in our lives. There are two things I would say about the people we remember today.

The first thing is that we loved them, and, perhaps more important, they loved us. Love means acting in trustworthy ways. Love means establishing and building a relationship of trust with the other person. Love means practicing forgiveness and having resilience in your relationship. Love means you are able to be fully yourself when you are with the person you love. Love means you are in a relationship where you know the other person very well, and they know you very well.

<u>This is the point</u> of life. The point of life is to be in relationships with people where the love is mutual and resilient and strong. When one of these people you love comes to the end of their earthly journey, you might think that the relationship is finished. But if your relationship with them was a relationship of mutual, resilient love, in some way, your relationship with them will <u>never</u> be finished.

St. Paul tells us "Love never ends." If you had a relationship of mutual love, even after they have died, you are able to have a conversation of a certain kind with your loved one. You are able to ask them a question, and you will be able to make a good guess about their response. As life proceeds, at one time or another you might hear the important questions they asked you, in a new situation. You will be strengthened by the way your loved one would have responded to the challenges <u>you</u> are facing today.

If you continue to grow and change, as time passes, these conversations might also change and become less vivid and frequent. But your relationship with this person who brought love and grace to your life is never finished. This is what St. Paul means when he says, "Love never ends."

There is a second important aspect of our relationships with these individuals who bring love and grace to our lives. None of us are perfect, but the saints we remember today lived with Christian virtues in the center of their lives. They told the truth. They cared for others. They did not think they were better than other people. They practiced forgiveness. In one way or another, they were generous.

These Christian virtues are like a torch that lights up the night. The torch they carried brought understanding and strength and assurance to us. In some way, the individuals we remember today have passed the torch on to us, or perhaps they are people who take turns carrying the torch with us.

Sometimes we feel alone, and that the burdens of life are heavy. But, when it comes to the most important part of life, we are playing a team sport. Being a Christian is a team sport. We are like runners in a relay race.

We take on different roles in the church and outside the church, we have different responsibilities, but we share the same goal, which is to carry the torch of love and grace that was passed on to us by the saints in our lives. Someone else, someone we loved, carried the torch for a time. Then they passed the torch on to you or to me.

Whether we move slowly or like the runners in the New York City marathon, you and I are running a certain kind of race. But it's a different kind of race than the race my niece is running this morning, 26 miles through the five boroughs of the city. We are members of a team. Our purpose is not to cross the finish line, but to carry the torch of grace and love for a short while, and then pass it on to the next person.

You and I will strive to run with perseverance the part of the race that has been given to us. Then we will pass the torch of truth, mercy, forgiveness, and generosity to the next person. In the course of fifty or one hundred years, the torch will be passed several times, and people will not know much about the work you and I did to carry the torch.

That's because the work we do is not about us. Life is not about us. Life is about a kind of love and a kind of grace and a kind of truth that is so much bigger than any one of us. The saints we loved and remember today understood this. They understood that their lives and their efforts and things they helped create were not really about them. They understood that they were playing a team sport. They ran their leg of the race, then passed the torch to the next person. And now their work and their witness to the love and grace of God is less and less remembered, except by you.

They would not be concerned. They understood they were playing a team sport. The things they really cared about were those same things that are most important to you. They cared about mercy and truth. They wanted to be generous and to be peacemakers, not for their own sake, but for the sake of others.

So persevere in running the race and in carrying the torch of grace and love. Resist the false virtues that surround you; resist the temptations of selfishness, pride, and domination. Do not attempt to run the race by yourself. Be strengthened by the God who forgives your sins, heals you from injury, and sustains you through the next mile of the race. Surround yourself with others who run beside you, striving to be witnesses to the love and grace of God.