

All Saints' Sunday Sermon 110710
Daniel 7:1-3,15-18; Psalm 149
Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

This is All Saints' Sunday – that day when we remember and celebrate the lives of all the “Saints of God” who live today and those who have gone before us. It is one of the high holy days of the Church, and according to our tradition should be on the same level as Christmas, Easter, Palm Sunday, and Pentecost Sunday, in terms of our celebration. But it's not typically held in such high regard. I think we have a little ambivalence, a little uncertainty, about All Saints' that we don't have about other Holy Days. And maybe the reason is: we have a lot of misconceptions, and mistrust about what – and who – saints are.

It's not just the people of St. John's, or the members of the Episcopal Church who have these misunderstandings though. The Merriam Webster Unabridged Dictionary has multiple definitions for the word, “saint;” many of which are incompatible with each other. For instance:

(A Saint is) one *officially recognized* or acknowledged as preeminent for consecration, holiness, and piety especially through canonization
....

In other words ... “an official” Saint – like St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke or St. John. Similarly, there is this definition:

(A Saint is) a person ... single-heartedly dedicated to holiness, religion, or a religious task: ... a holy or godly person: ... one eminent for piety, virtue, or purity of conscience.

Now let's face it, that definition seems just a bit daunting if we're looking for goals for ourselves. I don't know very many people – myself included – who are, or should be, at the top of anyone's list for “piety, virtue, or purity of conscience.” But ... listen to *this* definition:

(A Saint is) one of God's chosen people; ... *one belonging to the entire company of baptized Christians*....

That seems like a slightly more achievable standard doesn't it? Under that definition, we truly are ALL saints. And perhaps, under that definition, we can begin to connect in some real, tangible way to the Saints of God (capital S) as we have always understood that term. As usual though, our Prayer Book does a spectacular job of setting out this concept in a way that is truly understandable.

Our Catechism says this:

The communion of saints is *the whole family of God*, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise¹.

A few minutes from now, in the course of our common prayers, we will read a list of names of some people whom we love and who have passed from this life into the everlasting rest of our Savior. This great “cloud of witnesses” is part of the gathering that the Prayer Book defines as “the communion of saints.” But we

¹ The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church (Church Publishing Corp., 1979) p862

knew these people. And frankly we know that many of them were not what any of us would refer to as pious or “holy” people. And on some level, that causes us a problem as we celebrate the lives of all saints – and consider our own places in that group.

Think for a minute about an “official” Saint whose story you know, who epitomizes sainthood for you. For me there are several who spring to mind. First, there is St. Paul – in many ways the author of Christianity as we know it. Saul of Tarsus (who is known to us as Paul) had a dramatic conversion and then spent his life in absolute, unwavering faith and service to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And twelve centuries later there was St. Francis of Assisi; who was born wealthy and who literally gave away everything he had so that nothing would get in his way as he prayed, preached and worked for the Gospel. Francis was chronically ill because he didn’t eat well, lived in cold, damp conditions and never had enough clothing. His complete denial of self in service of Christ seems to me to be remarkably saintly. And in the modern world there is Mother Theresa – whose life in many ways reflects St. Francis’ life only in a different setting. Truly saints – in every sense of the word (although Theresa has not yet been officially canonized by the Roman Church).

Now, when I compare those people with some of the names that I put on our list, it seems to me that my family members don’t quite stack up. I might be

tempted to see my family members as “less saintly” than the “true” saints of old. But that is just not true.

The famous saints that I just mentioned were not perfect people either. Saint Paul was notoriously hard to work with because he was never wrong – at least in his own mind. His long-standing feud with St. Peter and St. James is the stuff of legend – and not exactly “holy” or “pious” behavior. If you don’t believe that St. Paul had a fiery temper, look at the flamethrower of a letter he wrote to the church in Galatia. The same is true of St. Francis and Mother Theresa. Read biographies of the two of them and you’ll find that the people who worked with them always expected them to be kind, generous, and “saintly” to those with whom they worked – and it was seldom the case. These two people were so single-minded in their devotion to their causes that they had very little patience for anyone who did not share 100% of their vision. St. Francis left the order that he founded – the Franciscans – toward the end of his life, because of a disagreement over whether or not life was too easy for the brothers of the order. Francis wanted no part of what had been built up through his life’s work. And Mother Theresa often told young priests, nuns and monks who wanted to learn from her that they should leave her alone and go out in the streets to minister to the poor and outcast.

You see ... even the “perfect” saints are not perfect. Like us, they were just people who were trying to follow where it was that they believed God to be leading them.

Sometimes I hear people say things like: “I don’t want to get involved with the church because I know a lot of the people there and they are hypocrites.” That attitude is frankly nothing more than a cop-out for someone who is too lazy, too disaffected or too frightened to get involved with the church. Sure there are hypocrites in the Church – just as there are hypocrites in the world. Whatever sorts and conditions of people you find in the world at large, you will also find in the Church. As an old saying goes:

The Church is not a resting place for self-satisfied Saints. It is a hospital for sick sinners.

And we are ALL sick sinners – every single one of us “Saints of God.”

But the reason that the wayward family members whom I put on our list are counted amongst the communion of saints – and the only reason that you and I are similarly counted in that group – is because of the grace and love of God as shown to the world through Christ Jesus.

You see ... Jesus did not come into the world to congratulate the self-satisfied, or to give kudos to those who believed that they had it all worked out – or figured out. No ... He came into the world to save sinners – every single one of us. If you don’t believe me, look at the people with whom Jesus spent the most

time: the tax collectors, the prostitutes; those who were ostracized by society because they were socially and religiously unacceptable.

We – all of us saints of God – have the same short-comings, foibles – or in more modern terms, “issues” – as all of those saints who have gone before us had. People have always been people. People will always be people. The difference between the Saints (capital S) and us saints (small s) is that they *decided* to make God central in their lives and then worked at making that a reality every day.

We can also *decide* to be Disciples of Jesus Christ. And we can work at that process every day. God is constantly trying to lead us into a fuller and deeper relationship with God’s self. It is up to *us* to make the decision to find those things which can work to achieve that goal. When we make that decision and begin that work, it doesn’t mean that we will be better than other people. It doesn’t mean that we will have more perfect lives than other people. It simply means that we will be in relationship with the God who created us – which can help us tap into that “peace which passes all understanding,” and can help us experience the Kingdom of God right here, right now, surrounded by these other hypocritical, broken, but trying to be faithful saints.

Thanks be to God for “all y’all” saints of God. Amen.