

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
All Saints 2024 Year B
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: All Saint's Sunday

When I was in my junior year of college, I attended my first Episcopal Church, for The Great Vigil of Easter. I had no idea what to expect. I entered the dark church at 9:00 p.m. with a handful of friends from college. I was fascinated by the strange and wonderful things taking place in worship. I had never heard chanting, never smelled incense in church and I had certainly never heard of anyone starting a small bonfire in church before. I was really getting into the service as it moved toward a baptism service, when I became uncomfortable. The Cantor was singing the names of people some familiar and some strange to me:

Holy Mary	pray for us
Holy John the Baptist	pray for us
Holy Peter and Paul	pray for us

Holy Ignatius of Antioch	pray for us
Holy Polycarp	pray for us
Holy Perpetua and Felicity	pray for us

And it kept going and going and going. I was scandalized. I had never even thought about the saints much less asked them to pray for me. Some of the people being named I had never even heard of, who was Polycarp? I didn't know what to do. Should I stay or should I run out of there away from those heretics asking the saints to pray for them? The music was beautiful and the people all around me were responding with gusto and they seemed sincere and devout. Then, I began to be surprised by the names of a few people being chanted:

Holy George Herbert	pray for us
Holy John Donne	pray for us

Hey, what? I was reading their work in my English literature course, could I ask them to pray for me? I could use some help on my upcoming essay. I actually knew their writings and had found them helpful to my spiritual life.

Holy Dietrich Bonhoeffer	pray for us
Holy C.S. Lewis	pray for us
Holy Dorothy Sayers	pray for us
Holy Martin Luther King Jr.	pray for us

Hey I knew these people. In fact, I had read Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison he wrote from inside a Nazi prison camp during WWII as a leader of the confessing church who resisted the Nazi regime. I had read a lot of C.S. Lewis, one of the most articulate Christian writers I had found. Dorothy Sayers was a darn good mystery writer and an amazing feminist and scholar. Was she a saint? I knew the sacrifices of Martin Luther King Jr. in the struggle for equality and justice

that had cost him his life. He was certainly a saint.

The singing went on as the procession continued to the baptismal font. It was a mystical experience for me. The prayers of the saints swirling in the rafters of the church, their lives and witness filling the room and charging the waters of baptism with meaning. This was my introduction to the communion of the Saints. And while I was not sure what to make of it having been raised in a rather sheltered part of the Protestant Church that did not go in for all that saints stuff, there was something deeply appealing about it. Being a Christian in this church meant having a history, a history that looked back upon the lives of the faithful, honoring their memory and asking them to pray for us that we might also be faithful. It meant that the faith I was a part of was centuries deep and continents wide. In short, it meant that I was not alone in my faith but was a part of a vast community that extended beyond time and space. It meant for me that faith was not so much a private affair but a family affair. It helped me to begin to realize that my own faith in God was both a gift from God and from the countless faithful people who had lived the faith sharpening it with their lives and handing it on to others and to me.

More than any other Sunday in the church year, The Feast of All Saints is a kind of designated family reunion day, an important time of checking in with our family members, ancient, modern and otherwise. It is a time to take out the family photo albums and scrapbooks remembering where we came from and hopefully to get some perspective on where we are going. All Saints is a time to remember the generations of faithful men and women who have served God in innumerable ways and to heighten our awareness of the millions of saints living around and amidst us still.

You might find St. Francis standing barefoot, wearing a mud-colored robe tied around with a piece of rope, rebuilding a church by hand or find him hands outstretched communing with God's creation and preaching to the birds.

Or perhaps you will find the mystic Dame Julian of Norwich living in her cell attached to a church, one window looking onto the street and the other looking into the altar of the church. What a wonderful double vision a view into the sacred mysteries of the church and out onto the sacrament of the everyday with a purposeful blending of the two.

You might encounter Jonathan Myrick Daniels, from Keene, NH, gunned down outside an Alabama grocery store as an Episcopal seminarian working for civil rights during God's long summer of 1965.

Or Saint James the Greater, brother of St. John, who was so full of grace on his way to his death that the guard assigned to him fell on his knees and confessed faith in his prisoner's God. James raised him up by the hand, kissed him on the cheek, and said, "Peace be with you." Then both men were executed together, but their last sweet exchange lives on in the exchange of the peace that we observe to this day: "The Peace of the Lord be always with you." (taken from Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon God's Handkerchiefs)

When you start meeting these saints, one of the first things you begin to notice is that they were not all really that saintly. St. Francis it is said rolled naked in the snow to defend himself against his lusty thoughts. Saint Mary of Egypt was a prostitute for 17 years before she became a desert mother for the next fifty. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux for all his beautiful preaching of love for God

without measure, was also one of the organizers of the 2nd Crusade to liberate Jerusalem, which collapsed into an orgy of pillaging and looting. St. Augustine of Hippo disgracefully left his long-time concubine and son after converting to the faith. What a deadbeat! Generally speaking, the saints of God are not always recognized for their perfection or by their innate goodness. They are distinguished by their extravagant love of God, which shines brighter than anything else about them usually transforming their life and the lives of others in remarkable ways.

There is a sign on the Winchester cathedral in England that reads as you enter the church, “you are entering a conversation that began long before you were born and will continue long after you’re dead.” To be a Christian partly means that we don’t have to reinvent the wheel, morally speaking. We don’t have to make up this faith from scratch. It has been lovingly passed on to us and the saints will teach us, if we will listen.

In the words of one beloved hymn, “They were all of them saints of God and I mean, God helping to be one too.” Do you want to be a saint have you ever realized that you are one by being a follower of Christ? The same light - Christ’s light – that we see shining in the saints - shines in us too.

All Saints is also an opportunity to recognize the millions of Christians who live among us and around us in our lifetime as faithful witnesses to God’s saving love. People like Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu, Millard Fuller the founder of Habitat for Humanity, or Florence Nyberg, well you probably don’t know here as she was my intrepid Sunday School teacher, she somehow kept a group of 4th grade boys riveted with her power of flannel graph magic. The woman could tell a story! You can make your own list of saints and probably should. I have friends that have printed out images of their saints and put them up on the wall by their desks.

We can take heart as we look toward the future that holds out the possibility of an incredible throng of people who will in their own way and time serve the same living, loving and liberating God. Those who will join “the great multitude that no one could count from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” We need to let the wonder of All Saints reverberate in our minds, and allow its significance to lift our hearts and expand our all too frequently troubled and anxious souls.

The simple fact of all this ruminating on the saints is this: Once you are baptized, you belong to God and all that remains to be seen is what you will do about it. So Zara, Io, Benjamin and Malaya as welcome you into the family of faith through the waters of baptism, remember that you don’t have to be famous or perfect, or dead to be a faithful Christian. You just have to be you – the-one-of-a-kind, never-to-be-repeated human being whom God created you to be- to love as you are loved, to throw your arms around the world, and to shine like the sun, radiating God’s love.

And remember, you don’t have to do this alone. You have a great deal of company, in fact, All the Saints those you can see around you and those you cannot like Mary and Hilda, and Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Teresa and many others are all pulling for you, cheering you on from the throne room of God, shouting words of encouragement, and praying for your success as a servant God with all your heart and mind and strength. If we could see it, if just for a moment the curtain were pulled back, it would make the NFL this Sunday look like child’s play. The

communion of the saints is vast, rank upon rank, tier up tier, deck upon deck, as far as they eye can see and beyond, a countless throng of faithful lovers of God is cheering you on, shouting words of encouragement, whispering advice, urging you toward love and compassion, interceding for you to the One who lives in inaccessible light! Why? Because you are a part of them and they are a part of you, and all of us are knit together in the communion of saints. Amen.