

All Saints Day 2007

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18

Eph 1:11-23

Luke 6:20-31

This day in the life of the church has always been one of my favorites. We gather with many emotions, memories, and hopes on this day. And, I have always been grateful for the bold statement of assurance that the Church makes in the face of our sorrow, joys, loss, and wondering about how we live faithfully from this day forward. I will admit, I like the tradition and ritual and setting aside of the Holy we highlight on this day ... that there is something bigger than ourselves we are swept up in ... or as it says in Daniel, a kingdom we shall receive forever and ever. Amen!

So, first I want to give you a bit of history about where this tradition and celebration came from and then think a bit about what we mean, when we speak of saints ... and what that means for us today.

Originally, in the first three hundred years after Christ died, “a saint was someone who was killed for Christ. These were the martyrs of the church, people who were persecuted by the Romans for their faith in Christ. St. Ignatius said that the ‘blood of the martyrs were the seeds of the church.’”<sup>1</sup>

Then, things began to change in the year 313, when Constantine became emperor of the Roman Empire and he made it a law that everybody had to be Christian. This sparked the Roman Catholic Church and its rise of power. For Constantine, this became the glue that held the Roman Empire together for 1300 years. During this time, sainthood was given by the church to those who exemplified the faith and were particularly famous or heroic in their service to others. But, again sainthood was given after death and the living were encouraged to pray to the saints, who were part of the heavenly host and near to God ... the saints in turn, would hear their prayers and would put in a good word for them before God.

Then came the Reformation in the 1500s and the Reformers questioned the layers of intercession or the “middlemen” that the Church had created between the people and God. We talked about indulgences last week, but the Reformers also argued that God wanted

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pulpit.org/articles/November07Lectionary.asp>

people to speak directly to God in prayer ... the saints weren't necessary. And they took it a step further, that God so much wanted to be in relationship with all people that through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, ordinary people as well as priests, nuns, and monks could become saints. That there weren't higher callings or more holy callings that set people apart, but that everyone is given necessary gifts and strengths to be used in faith, for the sake of their neighbor and building trust in God's presence in the world. In this, your grandmother, cousin, parent, sibling and best friend could be honored as saints, gathered around the throne room of God. ... In many ways, this is how this day still gets remembered and celebrated ...

as we remember those who have died during the past year, we rightly think about the way they touched our lives, shared love, made us laugh, helped us through struggles, cared for others, and modeled the faith in various ways for us. Important to our grieving process, we give thanks for the gift of life God gave to them and for all we received by knowing them and loving them.

But, there is more to this day, more that the Bible says about saints, ... more that moves us beyond death and the past into life and the future. It is the element of scripture we often miss with our English translation. In the Bible, the word saint, is never single. It is always plural. The New Testament was first written in Greek and like Spanish and French, when you find the noun saint, it always has a plural ending ... not *usted*, but *ustedes*. The Bible doesn't have a concept of individual saints: St. Mark or St. Luke or St. Matthew, instead the word saints, means God's holy ones. We are holy because God loves us and unites us through the body of Christ to a community, who shares in this inheritance of hope, wisdom, life, and a kingdom that has no end.

Or as Paul prayed in Ephesians, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and

seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places ... far above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.” (1:17-21)

So, what does it mean to be a saint? Through scripture, we discover that sainthood isn't something just for the dead and it isn't an individual identity. Sainthood is for the living and it necessitates community. But, we also discover in scripture that sainthood isn't something we achieve, but a way of life God gives us and calls us into. “Martin Luther described this as simultaneously living as saint and sinner. That we are 100% sinner, and 100% saint. I know that the math does not add up, but it is who we are. Being a sinner means that we are often tempted to play God in how we live and in how we deal with other people. We judge others. We look upon them with envy. We neglect the needs of the poor, because we are more concerned with ourselves and our needs. We cannot escape this innate nature.

It's necessary for us to recognize our sinfulness in order to see our need for Christ and his saving act of dying on the cross for us. Romans 3:23-26 tells us that all have "fallen short" and are in need of God's grace, which is given to us as a gift. There is nothing that we can do to earn it. We can only receive this gift of God's love given for us. "God died for us while we were still sinners" is a powerful message of love for all of humanity.”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, our lives as saints is less about working hard to decrease our sin bucket to zero and increase our saint bucket to 100, as if we started out as 50 – 50 sinner and saint. “Instead, saints live acknowledging their life as sinner and therefore, their need for Christ. Saints celebrate the forgiveness that they receive through baptism and look forward to the promise of eternal life in Christ. Saints strive to grow in faith and knowledge of God's presence and work in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Or maybe this illustration will help, “A pastor was walking with a little girl through their sanctuary and she was admiring the stained glass windows and how the south sunlight was highlighting the colors and designs of each. The pastor started telling the little girl about them. The first window with all the reds was dedicated to St. Matthew and it has a

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<sup>2</sup> herewestandconfirmation.org (How to tell a sinner and saint lesson, deep prep)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

picture of St. Matthew on it. The next window, with all the blues was dedicated to St. Mark and it had a picture of St. Mark on it. The third window, with all the greens was dedicated to St. Luke, and the fourth, with all the yellows was dedicated to St. John. After the pastor finished, the little girl responded, “I know what a saint is.” “A saint is somebody that the light shines through.” The pastor, impressed said, “Yes, the light of God shines through the lives of the saints. It is not your light that shines, it is the light of Christ shining through your lives and it is this that inspires others, like these windows inspired you.”<sup>4</sup>

Today, we remember and celebrate those who have gone before us, fellow sinners and saints, who allowed Christ’s light to shine through them and inspired us to trust this to be true for our lives as well. We live in hope because these saints, who went before us and lived through all kinds of struggles and questions, and joys stayed strong and sang songs of praise to God, because of their faith in what Christ did for them. By their example, we turn from our lives as individuals toward the gift of life Christ gives us as the Communion of Saints, the body of Christ, who is called by the Holy Spirit to let Christ’s light shine through for the next generations that follow.

And I know you hunger for this, you deeply desire to live according to God’s will and purpose for your life, but it is not always easy to live as a saint, when you are also sinner. So, I offer one way to help with your discernment from the faith practices our Akaloo curriculum offers in the adult curriculum:

Turn again to the words of Paul, but this time the instruction he gives the Galatians. In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul spells out the fruits of the Spirit. You will know that Christ’s light is shining through you when you see these fruits ripening around you. And my only caution here (in this day and age, where we lean toward instant results, is that God’s time is not our time ... that the seeds that are planted by God through us, may not bear fruit for some time, but God’s word never returns empty.) That said, the fruits of the Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If what you are considering doing or saying would seem to increase this fruit in our lives and communities, then discernment might point us in that direction. If, on the other hand, something under consideration would seem to decrease this fruit in our lives and

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/all\\_saints\\_what\\_is\\_a\\_saint.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/all_saints_what_is_a_saint.htm)

communities, then the Spirit is probably calling you in a different direction.<sup>5</sup> Or as Jesus summarized in the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

Jesus also raised the bar in our Gospel lesson today to make sure that we don't use the world's measures of success as signs of God's kingdom or our sainthood, but continue to lean completely on Christ, as the source of our light and hope. Because with Him, the poor, the hungry, the grieving, and hated will be lifted up, made full, laugh, and leap for joy. And the vision of what we can become is radiant white and brilliant. “Because in Him, you and I are living saints. It's true. You are God's holy people, the body of Christ, the communion of saints. God takes great pleasure in your company. And your lives are an inspiration ... God's work. And your hearts, minds, and hands radiating Christ's light into the world, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Akaloo.org Adult Faith Practices, Unit 1