

All Saints

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

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May God's word be spoken, May God's Word be heard, and May that point us to the living Word who is Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today is the feast day of All Saints Day. It is the day when we commemorate the lives of the faithful departed. For most of us a Saint refers to someone long gone - someone who is portrayed in stained glass windows and painted into frescoes in ancient churches. It is a day in which we remember those who have died for their beliefs. Those who stood firm in their faith and did not back down even in the face of persecution and death. And there are many of these such stories to remember on this day.

We might think of Saint James, the Apostle and the brother of Jesus, who continued to preach the Gospel message despite hostile resistance. For his beliefs he was thrown from the roof of the Temple and beaten to death. Or perhaps we might recall the story of Agnes, a martyr of the early church who did not renounce her faith even in the face of death. She died in Rome in 304 when she was twelve years old. Despite the persecution she suffered, she did not renounce her faith. And lest we think dying for our faith is phenomenon reserved for the early church we can remember Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a white seminary student who joined the fight for civil rights in Alabama in 1965. When a black teenage girl was

threatened by a man with a shotgun, he pulled her aside to protect her and was killed by the blast.

Today is not only a day to commemorate the lives of those who have suffered and died for their faith, it is also a day in which we remember those who have led exemplary lives. Perhaps we might remember the life of St. Jerome, a priest and scholar in the 5th century who undertook the monumental task of translating the entire Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, thereby establishing the practice of translating the Bible into the language of the people. Or perhaps we might remember Florence Nightingale, the British nurse whose practices of sanitation saved hundreds of lives during the Crimean War and who is credited with founding the modern profession of nursing. Think of how many lives have been saved over the past century because of the practices she instituted!

Of course we could go on and on with stories from the past – stories of martyrs and stories of people who led exemplary lives. And if those stories are of interest to you, I commend to you a wonderful resource of our Church: *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. All Saints Day isn't the only day on which we remember the saints who have gone before us. The book commemorates the lives of hundreds of notable figures in our tradition, each on an appointed day throughout the year. All of the individuals I have just mentioned are in this book, which is a wonderful collection of stories and prayers to help us remember them.

I love *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, and I certainly do commend it to you. I also want to offer a caution, as we gather together to celebrate All Saints Day. It is certainly easy to allow this day, and *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, in particular, to narrow our definition of a “saint.” If we read these stories and reflect on these lives we can think that in order to be considered a “saint” one must lead a particularly exemplary life or die a gruesome death. It can seem that the criteria for sainthood are far beyond our reach.

But this is not the case. Saints are not only figures written up in books. Today we commemorate “All Saints” - not only those who get written up in books, but also ALL those who have gone before us. We remember our loved ones who have died. In our prayers today we remember, particularly, all those who have died in the past year. We celebrate their lives and the life they now have in the nearer presence of our Lord. We give thanks for their lives and for the gift of having been able to know them.

But our understanding of a “saint,” does not stop there. While death may be a prerequisite for sainthood in the Vatican, in our experience [and in the hymn we just sang], we are reminded that it is possible to meet a living and breathing saint.

And that is what I want to encourage us to think about today. In addition to remembering those who have gone before us, we can also think about the saints

we know today. Perhaps they are a little harder to recognize. Unlike the figures in the past, they may not be martyrs or players on the world stage. They aren't portrayed in stained glass windows and painted into frescoes, but they are holy people. And they are inspiring. And that is the true mark of a saint – someone who inspires us to live better – to be our best selves. Someone who inspires us to live more fully into our life as a follower of Jesus Christ.

They are the people in our lives who have the skills we strive after. The people who already live into the gifts we ourselves are just beginning to realize we possess. They are the people whose mere presence makes our day better. Perhaps it is a teacher who seems to have endless patience with us when we are learning a new skill. Perhaps it is a best friend who sees our potential for greatness, and also has an uncanny ability to tell us the truth in love in a way that allows us to see our failings, while also ensuring that we never feel like a failure. Perhaps it is the child whose questions inspires us to think about the world in a whole new way. Or maybe it is a parent or a grandparent who models for us the unconditional love of God.

Hopefully, we have many people in our lives who we would consider “saints.” Today is a day for celebrating the inspiring lives of all the saints – both living and departed. This morning we give thanks to God for the gift of the lives and examples of those who have gone before us. And then I encourage us, as we

go forth from this remembrance that we shift our focus to those “saints” who are alive and well. I encourage us to shift our focus because we have a unique opportunity with those saints that are among us. Not only do we have the opportunity to be in their presence and to learn from them, we have the opportunity to say “Thank you.” And saying "Thank you" is important - not because their sainthood is contingent on our gratitude, but because saying "Thank you" puts our focus on the gifts we have been given and on the path that leads to a fuller life in Christ. And expressing our gratitude enriches our relationships by helping us to more fully understand what we mean to each other. Acknowledging the gifts we have been given strengthens the ties that bind us together.

So take a moment this week to seek out one of your saints, and find a way to say “Thank you.” I hope, in your reflections, you will be surprised to discover how many saints you know, and I hope that your reflections will help you to see more clearly your own journey to sainthood on the path that Christ has laid out for you.

AMEN.