

TWO TYPES OF REMEMBERING ALL SAINTS DAY

(11/01/09)

Scripture Lessons: John 14:18-21
Matthew 28:16-20

“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” (John 14:19-20)

Today, on the liturgical celebration of All Saints Day and All Souls Day, I would like us to think about those who have gone before us, those who had a profound impact on the church, and those who had a profound impact on our lives.

The Roman Catholic Church has designated certain people in the history of the church as saints. We can think of saints this way, but we can also think of them in the way the apostle Paul speaks of them. Paul describes saints as those who experience the kingdom of God and who make this a living reality in their lives. In his letters to the early churches, Paul reminds his parishioners that we are all called to be saints.

Today our focus is not on the official saints of the church but on those people who have had a profound impact on our lives. We pray for their souls, as the church has always done for the souls of the departed on All Souls Day. We also ask them for their assistance in the living of our lives, just as people have always done on All Saints Day, for the saints have something to teach us about the living of our lives. And so we have set aside this day and this special time during our worship service to remember.

In these moments, let us bring to mind loved ones who have died, who have gone before us, those whose names we will lift up during our service of remembrance, celebration, and presence. Let us remember with love and gratitude in our heart.

There are two ways of thinking about remembering. The first moves from the present to the past. The second moves from the past into the present.

With regard to the first of these, when we remember something that happened in the past or when we remember someone who is no longer with us, our thoughts, our

mental images bring us from the present to the past. If it is a happy memory that we recall, the act of remembering will bring us back to happier times. It may bring us back to a time when a loved one was alive and was with us.

Remembering involves feelings as well as thoughts. In this way of remembering, by using our imagination to move from the present back into the past, we can reawaken the feelings that were originally associated with that time, with that event, with that loved one. As we remember an event, we re-experience the feelings that attended it.

This type of remembering is often tinged with sadness because, sooner or later, we have to let the memories go. We cannot spend our lives living in the past. We have to live our lives in the present. However, when we live in the present we lose those beautiful feelings that accompanied the experience of being in the presence of a loved one who is no longer with us.

However, this is not the only way to think about remembering, not the only way to experience remembering. Through remembering we can also bring the past into the present. Seen from this perspective, remembering is not the act of moving from the present to the past, but it involves a movement from the past to the present. It is a way of bringing the past alive. In this sense, remembering connects us with our loved ones not as a past memory but as an experience right here in the present.

I think this is the way we are supposed to think about the saints. On All Saints Day we are encouraged to remember the saints. I think this liturgical celebration was not meant to move us into the past. In fact, if we were to try to remember any of the great saints, people like St. Peter, St. Thomas, St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi, or the legendary St. Christopher, we would realize that we have no personal memories associated with them and, hence, no feelings that accompany the memories.

This is why I think the church would agree with my second explanation of remembering. If we remember St. Peter, we are bringing St. Peter -- with all his weaknesses as well as his strengths, into the present. This might help us to forgive

ourselves when we deny our Lord. When we remember St. Thomas, we, like Thomas, are encouraged to move past our doubts to experience Christ as a living reality in our lives. When we bring St. Benedict to mind we might recapture his vision of the monastic life, of the simple life. Remembering St. Francis can lead us to rediscover our connection to nature and repent of our great wealth, a wealth that separates us from Christ and from our brothers and sisters in need around the world.

In my understanding of what the church, in the Apostles Creed, has called “the communion of saints,” when we remember the “official” saints of the church, we are not moving from the present to the past; we are bringing the past alive in the present. We open ourselves to these people or spirits that they might become living realities in our lives. We can do this because they are living realities in the present, living realities in our lives. When we bring them into consciousness they come alive within us. Their spirits unite with our spirits. We take on their spirit. Their presence then guides us and strengthens us to become more fully the people that God wants us to be.

I think this is the way we are supposed to remember Jesus in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Jesus tells us to remember him. He tells us to share in this sacrament in remembrance of him. I do not think he wants us to remember him as a person who lived two thousand years ago. I think he wants us to receive him as a living reality into our lives. Only if he is a living reality in the present, a living presence, can he shape and form our lives.

My friends, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ is a living reality in the present, a living presence in our lives. All we have to do is be conscious of this and it will make a tremendous difference in the way we live our lives.

In our scripture lesson from the Gospel according to John, which we heard this morning, Jesus said,

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

I am in my Father. You are in me. And I am in you.

Jesus tells us that although the world will no longer see him, his disciples, those who love him will see him. If we are his disciples, we can never be separate from him. Jesus is in God, we are in Jesus, and Jesus is in us. Everything is contained within the great unity of God right here in the present.

This morning, I want to suggest that this is also true of our loved ones who have passed away, who appear to have died. Even though their form, the bodily form that we knew and loved has passed away, they are not gone. They are not relegated to the status of distant memories. They are still with us.

In our prayer every communion Sunday, we try to open ourself, to open our heart to Jesus' presence. We believe that this encounter, this experience is possible to those who approach the communion table in faith. When we join in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we are not remembering Jesus as someone who lived in the past. If we think of the sacrament in this way, we will have missed the deeper meaning of this sacrament. In this sacrament, we are not celebrating or witnessing to a past event; we are opening ourselves to the indwelling presence of Christ.

This morning, as we gather around the communion table, let us think of our loved ones the same way we think of Jesus. In our first understanding of remembering, we can set this time aside to remember them, to give thanks for their life, for the ways they touched our soul, for the ways that we are who we are because of them.

But we can experience more than this. We can experience the opening between the two worlds -- because there really aren't two worlds. We can experience the presence of our loved ones with and within us in this service and also in the days and weeks to come. In these moments we can dissolve everything that we mistakenly think separates us from our loved ones, for there is really nothing separating us from them.

In our service of remembrance, celebration, and presence, let us sit quietly. Let us listen for the names of our loved ones. Let us not only be thankful for their lives and for what they meant to us, let us actually feel their presence. Let us listen to the names of loved ones who have been brought forth and offered up by others. If we can feel the presence of these loved ones, these saints, both with us and within us in this service of worship, we will be not only celebrating All Saints' Day, we will be experiencing it.

Then let us also be in the presence of our Lord in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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