

## REMEMBERING THE SAINTS IN OUR LIVES

(11/03/19)

Scripture Lessons:    Hebrews 12:1-2  
                          Luke 22:14-20

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, . . .” (Heb 12:1)*

The scripture lesson we heard this morning, the brief selection from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, begins with the words, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, . . .” The passage goes on to tell us the kind of life we should lead.

When I first read this passage, I wasn’t sure to what the “great cloud of witnesses” referred. When I checked, it seemed that most biblical scholars believe it refers to other people. This was confirmed by one of many translations of the Bible, the *New Living Translation*, which translates the passage as, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses *to the life of faith*, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up.”

This implies that the “cloud of witnesses” refers to people who are witnesses to our behavior, to our way of life, to the way we conduct ourselves as Christians. This makes sense. A Christian should be a role model to others. We should show people what a life of faith looks like. We convert more people by our actions, by the quality of our life and our interaction with them than we do by our words, our sermons, our attempts at evangelization. This passage is a reminder that other people are looking at us. When they look at us, what do they see?

Mahatma Gandhi spoke to this when he said that he, a devout Hindu, found the teachings of Jesus to be spiritually profound. Gandhi went on to say that if someone were a Christian, this should show in the person’s life. It should make a discernable difference. The Christian should stand out from others, from those whose lives are not grounded in the teachings of Jesus. Then Gandhi said that, sadly, he has not found this to be the case.

If Gandhi’s observation is true, and it may very well be, isn’t this sad? Do we really have to tell people that we are Christians? Do we have to announce it to the world? “By the way, I would just like to tell you that I am a Christian. Can’t you tell by the cross that is hanging around my neck?” Is this what it means to witness to our faith?

Or, in the words of our hymn, can people “tell we are Christians by our love?”

If the reference to the cloud of witnesses refers to other people, I totally agree. We should be role models to others, showing them what a life of faith looks like. We believe that Jesus was transparent to God, which means that if you looked at Jesus you saw through him to

God. So, also, we should be transparent to Christ. When people look at us, they should be able to see through us to Christ, to the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. When they look at us, if all they see is *us*, perhaps we haven't really grasped what it means to be a Christian.

However, there is another way of looking at this passage. The “cloud of witnesses” that surrounds us may refer to something more mystical. It may be what the Apostles’ Creed refers to as “the communion of saints.” It proclaims that we are surrounded by the saints who have gone before us. It is to our impoverishment that we do not recognize the saints that live within us, that surround us, and from whom we can draw strength, courage, and guidance for our lives.

This brings us to the celebration of All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Before you object that this is Catholic, I would like you to remember that the Roman church is part of our heritage, at least up to the time of the Protestant Reformation. We don’t have to accept the theology or the teaching of the Roman church as authoritative, because we claim the Bible as our ultimate authority. This doesn’t mean that Catholics can’t have some good ideas.

All Saints' Day, also known as All Hallows' Day (saints have historically been known as *hallows*) or Feast of All Saints, is a Christian celebration to honor all known and unknown saints and martyrs. It falls on November 1 and is preceded by Halloween, its vigil, on October 31. It is followed by All Souls' Day on November 2. Together these three days of remembering the dead form the triduum (a religious observance lasting three days) of Hallowtide. People in many cultures traditionally visit the graves of deceased relatives during this time and place a lighted candle on the grave. While All Saints' Day is dedicated to those who are in heaven, All Souls' Day is a day of prayer for those who have died but have not yet reached heaven.

All Saints' Day is closely related to the Mexican holiday Day of the Dead, and the Celtic festival of Samhain. When we resume our movie nights as a church, which I hope to do in January, one of the movies I would like us to watch is *Coco*, a beautiful movie which is about the Mexican Day of the Dead.

This morning I would like us to think about what it means to be a saint. Saints are those who experience the kingdom of God within themselves and who make this eternal realm a living reality in their lives and in the world. As we are reminded by the words of our opening hymn, a saint is one for whom Christ Jesus is “their Rock, their Fortress, and their Might.” They are the ones whose path through the darkness is illumined by the one true Light. If we can move past the battle imagery, remembering that the words of this hymn were written at the time of the Civil War, we can see that it is calling us to be saints as well.

This morning I would like us to think about the communion of saints, the fellowship of those throughout history who have tried to be Christians, who have tried to be disciples of Jesus.

When we think of the saints, our hearts should be filled with gratitude. We can learn from their lives and struggles. They remind us that we are not the first to walk the path of the cross, if indeed we *are* walking this path. The saints were exceptional people. They show us what is possible for human beings who live faith-filled lives. They show us that miracles are possible, that if we have faith, we can do what Jesus did. Our prayers can facilitate healing in or bring life to those who suffer physically, emotionally, or spiritually. The saints are still alive not only in the realm of God; they are also alive within us. In Jungian terms, they are basically archetypes of the collective unconscious, shaping the way we relate to the world.

On All Souls' Day, Roman Catholics pray for people who are in purgatory. I like this. It is a reminder that our prayers can help us connect with people not only in this realm but in the realm of the kingdom of God. A nun, however, once told me how scrupulous she became about this practice. She had been taught that our prayers shorten our loved ones' stay in purgatory. She was also told that you never know whether *your* prayer might be the one that brings about the person's release. The nun didn't want to leave a loved one in purgatory for another thousand years simply because she was tired and decided to go to sleep. So, as a child, she tried to stay awake as long as she could to pray for these lost souls. When she awoke in the morning, she felt guilty for having fallen asleep. She awoke every morning feeling guilty.

The church seems to have a more than marginal propensity to take something meaningful and twist it into something that is spiritually and psychologically unhealthy. Rather than throw out the baby with the bath water, however, we should try to return to the original intent. All Souls' Day is a day to pray for and talk to those who have gone on before us.

In the quiet of our communion service, let us think about those who have had a profound impact not only on the church and the world, but also and especially on our lives. It might be a parent or grandparent, a husband or wife, a friend or a child. Though they no longer walk this earth, they are alive in God's realm and they are also alive in our hearts. If we talk with them, and if we are very still, we may hear what they would say to us.

I think of both of my parents as saints; they taught me a lot about God and Jesus from the way they lived their lives. I remember the pastor of our church, Maple Street Congregational Church in Danvers, who reached out to my mother and me while my father was away in World War II. Reverend McElroy made sure we never went without. I remember my third-grade

Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Anderson, who fed us Ritz crackers and stuck pictures of Jesus on a flannel graph board. She let us know the church was a place where we belonged and where we were loved. I remember Reverend William Rees, the pastor of the church I served as youth minister while I was in theological school. He taught me by word and example what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a pastor.

I am who I am today partially because of these people, because of the communion of saints. I know my mother and father, Reverend McElroy, Reverend Rees, and Mrs. Anderson did not think of themselves as saints. They were ordinary people through whom I experienced the love of God. I have the same feeling about this church. I have experienced the love of God from you and with you. The communion of saints is right here, right now!

The apostle Paul begins his letter to the members of the church at Ephesus with the following salutation:

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,  
To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.*

Paul is speaking to the members of the church in Ephesus as if they were saints. His salutation challenges us to broaden our concept of sainthood, our understanding of what it means to be a saint. It challenges us to think not only of the great people in our religious tradition who have been officially designated as saints, but also to think of ourselves as saints, to live our lives as saints who are faithful to Christ Jesus.

In the quiet of our communion service, let us be with those who have gone before us but who are still present in our lives. Let us also be in the presence of the One who fills us with his Spirit and who graces us with his presence--our Lord Jesus Christ.

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