

FOR ALL THE SAINTS

(11/03/2024)

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

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us . . .” (Hebrews 12:1)

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 1:1-2)

In a previous church that I served as an interim pastor, I suggested we ask the children in our church school to serve as acolytes. I like to involve young people in our worship service. I also like the symbolism of bringing “the light” into the sanctuary to begin worship, strengthening the light through our worship, and then bringing it back into the world after the benediction. Having the acolytes light the two candles on our altar symbolizes the light that we bring to this church, to our worship, and also the light that we need to take back into our little corner of the world.

My suggestion to the church council of the former church met with immediate expressions of resistance. People said, “That’s Catholic” as if no more needed to be said! When I suggested it could still be a good idea, they told me we might lose parishioners over the change. Fortunately, one of the old timers recalled that the church had utilized acolytes in the distant past. We were then able to inform the congregation that we were *reinstating* the practice of acolytes--and everyone was happy! No one left the church, at least because of that. They left for different reasons—but that’s another story!

All Saints Day and All Souls Day are religious holidays that I would like us to claim or reclaim. Before you object that this observance is Catholic, I would like you to remember that the Roman tradition is part of our heritage, at least up to the time of the Protestant Reformation. We don’t have to accept the pronouncements of Rome as authoritative because we claim the Bible and the Holy Spirit as our ultimate authority. This doesn’t mean that Catholics can’t have some good ideas, even if, as I have often observed, they don’t quite understand how deep, meaningful, and important these ideas or religious/spiritual practices are!

Today I would like us to observe these two religious holidays that follow our celebration of Reformation Day. I would like us to think about the saints, 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.

So, what, exactly is 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. In the words of our opening hymn, a saint is one for whom Christ Jesus is “their Rock, their Fortress, and their Might.” A saint is one whose path through the darkness is illumined by “the One True Light.” If we can move past the battle imagery of this hymn, remembering that it was written at the time of the Civil War, we can see that it is calling us to be saints as well!

The Roman church believes in the communion of saints. The communion of saints, which is affirmed by the Apostles’ Creed, is part of our tradition as well. I think the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews affirms the communion of saints when he refers to a “great cloud of witnesses.” This morning, I would like us to think about the communion of saints, the cloud of witnesses, the fellowship of those throughout history who have tried to be disciples of Jesus, disciples of the Way.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the saints. We can learn from their lives and struggles. The saints were exceptional people, exceptional Christians. 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. They remind us of the spiritual power that dwells within us. They show us that prayer can facilitate healing in or bring life to those who suffer physically, emotionally, or spiritually. They not only lived in ages past; they still live! They live within us.

On All Souls’ Day, Roman Catholics pray for people who are in purgatory. A Roman Catholic nun, a good friend of mine, once told me how scrupulous she became about her bedtime prayers when she was a young child. She had been taught in CCD that our prayers can shorten our loved ones’ stay in purgatory. She was also told that you never know whether your prayer might be the one, the special one that makes the difference, that finally brings about the person’s release from purgatory. The little girl 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, 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, and every week she took this guilt to confession. That’s both very beautiful and very sad!

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 also to talk to loved ones who have gone on before us.

In this church, which falls into the category of what would be called “low-church” rather than “high-church,” we combine All Saints and All Souls Days into the first Sunday of November. Coincidentally, this past week I learned that we are not the only ones that combine these two special days. In the Boston Globe this past Tuesday, there was a photograph of totally white tombstones with a cross on the top of each of them. The caption read as follows:

On Monday, a man painted a tombstone ahead of All Saints’ Day at the San Sebastian municipal cemetery in the village of Casabermeja, southern Spain. Villagers clean and paint the tombstones before All Saints’ Day on November 1, a Christian holiday to honor the saints of the Church. People often take flowers to the graves of deceased relatives.

As you can see, their custom, their ritual combines All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day in their remembrance of deceased loved ones and the loving care of their tombstones on All Saints’ Day.

In the quiet of our communion service this morning, let us think about those who have had a profound impact not only on the church and the world, but also on our lives. It might be a parent or grandparent, an aunt or uncle, a husband or wife, a friend or a child. The person may be living or dead. If they no longer walk this earth, we need to remember that they are alive in God’s realm and also in our hearts. If we talk with them, and if we are very still, we may feel their presence and hear what they would say to us.

When I think back to my childhood, I remember how our minister 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 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 think of my parents, who brought me to church every Sunday, and, by their love, their sacrifices, their dedication to our family, to my brother and me, taught me what it means to be a husband and a father.

I am who I am today because of these people and many others, because of the communion of saints. I know Reverend McElroy, Reverend Rees, Mrs. Anderson, and my parents 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 over the past twenty-seven years. The communion of saints is with us and within us 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's greeting 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 even more importantly to think of ourselves as saints, to live our lives as saints who are faithful to Christ Jesus. Paul is reminding us that we can be to others what these special people were or are to us.

We are actually *called* to be for others what these special people were to us. We are called not only to be like St. Francis, Albert Schweitzer, and Mother Teresa, but also like those ordinary yet extraordinary people who touched our lives, who touched us deeply. When we become the saints that we are called to be, Christ lives both in and through us.

In the quiet of our communion service, let us talk to 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 the Holy Spirit and who graces us with his presence--our Lord Jesus Christ.

*A sermon shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.