

REMEMBER
ALL SAINTS AND ALL SOULS SUNDAY

(11/07/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 1:1-7
John 14:18-21, 25-27

“To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom. 1:7)

Today, the Sunday following All Saints Day, which was this past Monday, and All Souls Day, which was this past Tuesday, I would like us to think about those who have gone before us, those who are now experiencing what the Episcopal liturgy describes as “the nearer presence of God,” 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. These people lived exemplary lives, lives that were shaped and infused by their religious faith. They performed great works; in many cases, miraculous healings have been attributed to them, even after their death.

We can think of saints this way, as exceptional people who are in a qualitatively different category from us, 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 letter to the church at Rome, Paul reminds his parishioners that we are *all* God’s beloved and that we are *all* called to be saints. I think of both understandings when I reflect on “the communion of saints” as mentioned in the Apostles’ Creed.

Today our focus is not on the official saints of the church but on those people who have experienced the kingdom of God, who have made this a living reality in their lives, and who, consequently, have had a profound impact on our lives. For those who have entered the nearer presence of God, we pray for their souls, as people have 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. The saints, both the official saints and our own personal saints, have something to teach us about how we should live our lives. And so, we have set aside this day and this time during our worship service to remember.

In these moments, let us bring to mind loved ones who have passed on, those whom we will name and will lift up during our Service of Remembrance, Celebration, and Presence. Let us remember them with love and gratitude in our heart.

There are two ways to understand what happens when we remember. The first moves from the present to the past. The second moves from the past into the present.

When we remember something that happened in the past, 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 into the past, we reawaken the feelings that were 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 must let the memories go. We cannot spend our lives living in the past. We need to live our lives in the present. However, when we live in the present, we lose the beautiful feelings of being in the presence of a loved one who is no longer with us.

However, this is not the only way to understand what it means to remember. When we remember, we can bring the past into the present. Seen from this perspective, remembering is not the act of moving from the present to the past; it is the act of moving something or someone from the past into 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 and now.

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

Let me say just a few words about some of these saints, for I find myself drawn to them (even though I'm a Protestant). In Jungian terms, I think of the saints as archetypes of the collective unconscious, as constellations of the psyche, personified and perhaps even incarnated in certain individuals, that help us connect with God, ourselves, and the outside world in a healthy way, in a beautiful and loving way. In this vein, I think of some lesser known saints, like St. Jude, who is the patron saint of desperate cases and lost causes. I think of St. Dymphna, the patron saint of the mentally ill. At Foxborough State Hospital, where I served as Protestant Chaplain, there was a special mass to St. Jude and St. Dymphna on their feast days. This meant a lot to patients who were struggling with mental illness, who were trying not to give up hope and who were struggling not to see themselves as a lost cause.

We all know St. Anthony, who helps us find things we have lost or misplaced, but did you know that in addition to helping us find our car keys, he is the patron saint of lost souls? St. Christopher, who was recently removed from the official list of saints because he was not an historical person (a distinction that makes absolutely no sense to me), is the patron saint of travelers; he keeps you safe and helps you find your way on your journey through life. And I have always liked St. Philomena, who is the patron saint of infants, babies, and youth. You would pray to St. Philomena to keep your infant, baby, or child (or even your grandchild) safe. I think that's beautiful!

In the second way to remember, if we remember St. Peter, we can bring Peter--his weaknesses as well as his strengths into our consciousness. Peter might help us to forgive ourselves when we deny our Lord by not living the life to which he calls us. When we remember St. Benedict, this great monk might help us to grasp his vision of the monastic life, of the contemplative life. When we remember St. Francis, he can lead us to rediscover our connection to nature, to the simple life, and to repent of our great wealth, a wealth that separates us from Christ and from our brothers and sisters in need around the world.

The Apostles' Creed speaks of "the communion of saints." When we remember the saints, 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" in their spiritual form that they might become living realities in our lives. We can do this because they *are* living realities in the present; they *are* living realities in our lives. As we bring them into consciousness, they come alive within us. Their spirit unites with our spirit. Their presence then guides us and strengthens us to become more fully the people that God wants us to be.

The cloth gracing our communion table contains the embroidered word *Remember*. I think this second way of remembering 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 simply remember him, to honor him as an exceptional 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 already *is* a living reality in the present, a living presence in our lives. If we are conscious of this; if we open our heart and mind to his presence, we will experience the kingdom of God.

In the scripture lesson we heard this morning, Jesus said to his followers,

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.

Jesus tells us that he is in God, that God is in him, and that he is in us. He says that although the world will no longer see him in his human form, his disciples, those who love him will see him, will experience his presence. If we are truly his disciples, we can never be separate from him.

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 the bodily form that we knew and loved, the bodily form that housed their soul has passed away or dissolved, they are not gone. They are not relegated to the status of distant memories. They are still with us.

In our prayer on communion Sunday, we 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. 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 then 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.

In our Service of Remembrance, Celebration, and Presence, let us sit quietly. Let us remember our loved ones who have passed on. Let us not only be thankful for their lives; let us experience their presence. Let us feel the presence of these loved ones, these saints, these precious souls both with us and within us in this service of worship and in the week to come.

Let us be in the presence of our Lord in and through the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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November 7, 2021*