

All Saints' Sunday
November 5, 2017
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Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

All Saints' Day is a big deal in the Episcopal Church. We're not the only ones, of course. I don't mean to take anything away from how others celebrate the occasion, but I know best how we celebrate it in our tradition. It's a big enough deal that we always carry the celebration over to the Sunday following the feast day itself (which officially was last Wednesday).

I wanted to be a little careful not to simply repeat myself for our celebration here this year, so I went back to check on what I said in my prior years with you. But it turns out, I haven't said all that much here for All Saints' Day. I didn't preach on the occasion last year, nor the year before. Last year, we had Bishop John Thornton. The year before, we had a "virtual" Michael Curry. (We streamed his installation as Presiding Bishop from the National Cathedral.)

I guess they helped make our celebrations of All Saints' Day a big deal on both those occasions (and for my part, I have one or two vivid memories of each of them), but I do worry that maybe these larger-than-life preachers may have been a distraction from the import of the day; we may remember *them*, but not necessarily how they helped us see ourselves.

In some churches, the stained glassed windows are depictions of saints. In those places, you might imagine yourself surrounded by the saints of God whenever you come to worship.

It's not so immediately obvious at Trinity, but when we worship here, we, too, are surrounded by saints, as well. The symbols on our windows represent the 12 apostles:



PETER



ANDREW



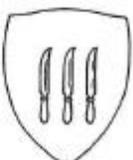
JAMES



JOHN



PHILIP



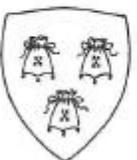
BARTHOLOMEW



THOMAS



JAMES THE LESS



MATTHEW



JUDE



SIMON



JUDAS

Some of ours are obvious, perhaps, Peter and Andrew, for example. And then there are others, less obvious for most of us: scallop shells for James the Great, and the saw for James the Less. ⁱ

In a book of saints that Betsy Lamb has loaned me, Robert Ellsberg talks about the kinds of saints we see in stained glass windows, the “greatest of the canonized saints: Teresa of Avila, Jerome, Augustine, Catherine of Siena, Clare and Francis of Assisi ...”

But Ellsberg goes on to lament how surrounding ourselves with “the greatest of the ... saints” can be harmful to us. To make the point, he talks about how the early church used to gather at the graves of martyrs to remember their heroic witness.

There was a time when martyrdom was virtually the defining characteristic of sainthood. The men and women who died in the Roman arena had offered a total witness to Christ ... Their blood, as Tertullian has said, was the seed of the church. But as the era of martyrdom passed, so it became clear that there were other ways of bearing witness. There were those whose prayer and self-sacrifice were so intense as to constitute a kind of living martyrdom. Such holy men and women did more than set an edifying example. They assumed an aura of transcendence and sacred power. ⁱⁱ

His concern – though he doesn’t put it quite this way – is that we have come to think of saints as exotic creatures, encased within stained glass windows. They wear religious garb. They’re not merely hallowed, after all, but “haloed” as well.

If that’s how we think of the saints of God, then they, like Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount,” the beginning of which we heard in this morning’s gospel, might seem extreme. There have been times when that’s how the Church made sense of Jesus’ Beatitudes. Many people saw Jesus’ words as “Counsels of Perfection.” They applied to a “spiritual elite” class – priests and monks and nuns – but they were beyond the reach of ordinary folks, like you and me. ⁱⁱⁱ

If we hear the Beatitudes as “Counsels of Perfection,” we probably think of them as beyond us. If we imagine saints as “perfect Christians,” we probably imagine them as being so unlike us as to bear little relevance for us.

All of which is to say, that, ironically, even saints can distract us from the import of All Saints’ Day. If we venerate them, rather than imitate them, we are no better off. Worse yet, veneration can easily pass on into pious trivialization. “They’re saints,” we say, “It’s not the same for us.”

I think, for example, of what’s said about Francis of Assisi in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*: “Of all the saints, Francis is the most popular and admired, but probably the least imitated.” (Ouch!)

So let me remind you that when they were alive, nobody called them saints. As someone else once observed: “Only time and distance have given them their haloes.”

Most of the biblical heroes of the faith, after all, were deeply flawed. It'd be a fruitful exercise to go back and read again the stories from the Old Testament we've been hearing these past months: stories of Abraham and Jacob and Isaac, stories of Joseph and his brothers, stories of Moses and the fickle people he led through the wilderness. And yet the biblical witness is that such flawed people were used to free God's people and lead them to the Promised Land. Or fast forward to New Testament times and recall some of the stories of the disciples ... Peter, perhaps, in particular! And those are just the stories the tradition has held onto for us.

We would do well to enlarge our imagination about what makes a saint a saint.

Which is, by the way, why our church calendar has grown in recent years. We've added women, because we all need to know that it's not just men who live valiantly. We've added Roman Catholics and Protestants and at least one non-Christian, because it's not just Episcopalians and Anglicans whose lives shine with the radiance of God. We've added nurses and teachers and activists and poets and abolitionists, because it's not just clergy who proclaim the good news of God's love for all people.

When Jesus sat down on the side of a mountain to tell the crowds about those he deems "blessed," he wanted to shift their attention – and ours – from paying attention only to the an elite class. Then, as now, the rich and powerful get plenty of attention. Jesus was trying to get them – and us – to notice the kind of people often overlooked. He wants us to reconsider who deserves our attention, respect, and honor.

It was Oscar Wilde who once insisted, "Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future." Saints and sinners ... we're not so far apart, not so very different.

That's not to say it makes no difference what we do with our lives or how we behave. It's just to say that we are, each of us and all of us, called to be saints – to let go of our pasts in order to embrace a future in which we see ourselves as children of God,^{iv} blessed by God, and come to see ourselves as a blessing to others.

All Saints' Day is, as I've already said, a big deal in the Episcopal Church. We don't sing much at our early service here, but I suspect you all know some of the hymns we'll sing later. For my part, it'd be hard to imagine celebrating the day without our opening hymn, singing a song about the saints of God. In the first verse, we'll sing about some of those saints:

... one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
and one was a shepherdess on the green:

In the second verse, we'll sing about some of God's other saints:

... one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast:

And in the last verse, we'll sing about where we can see them, if we are looking, and what difference it make, if we're paying attention:

They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still;
the world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.

The saints of God surround us in our worship. Some of them in stained glass windows. Some of them we bring with us, unseen by others, from our pasts. Some of them sit in pews next to us.

We give thanks this day for all these saints of God, surrounding us on every side. They surround us to cheer us on to live valiantly, to shine forth with the light of God's holiness, to proclaim the good news of God's love for all people.

ⁱ The symbols shown come from *Dictionary of Church Terms and Symbols* (The C. R. Gibson Company, Norwalk, Connecticut, 1964). These drawings closely match the symbols included in our windows. [I don't see anything like a Judas window. It looks to me like, probably, we've dropped St. Matthias (chosen by the apostles (and a roll of the dice) to take the place of Judas Iscariot, the betrayer) in for the 12th window.]

ⁱⁱ Robert Ellsberg, in *All Saints: Daily Reflection on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1997), p. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Pagano @ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2017/10/05/the-beatitudes-and-barriers-all-saints-day-november-1-2017/>.

^{iv} In our epistle reading, the author exhorts us first to "SEE" ... Note the very first word is "see." It's an exhortation to see ourselves as God sees us. I hear the opening verse, then, as a "re-set" of our self-perceptions:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.

It's a short step, it seems to me, from coming to see ourselves as "blessed" (i.e., set apart for God's purposes more than rewarded with special favors!) to seeing ourselves as "children of God." Perhaps the terms are really interchangeable.