

All Saints' Sunday (Year B)  
November 7, 2021  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 25:6-9  
Psalm 24  
Revelation 21:1-6a  
John 11:32-44

Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at [www.trinitybend.org](http://www.trinitybend.org).

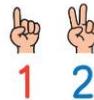
I sing a song of the saints of God,  
patient and brave and true,  
who toiled and fought and lived and died,  
for the Lord they loved and knew.



Oh, that's just how it starts. We sing that song just about every year when we celebrate All Saints' Day. For some – myself included! – it just wouldn't be right NOT to sing it.

It's our closing hymn this morning. And the last half of the last verse gets to the reason why, so far as I'm concerned, we HAVE to sing this song of the saints of God every year:

You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,  
in church, or in trains, or in ships, or at tea,  
for the saints of God are just folk like me,  
and I mean to be one too.



Apart from the visual pun at the end – *and I mean to be one (1) too (2)* – which IS great fun, the song reminds us that this celebration of saints has something to do even with you and with me.

That's probably not what most of us learned what it means to be a saint.

I have a friend who grew up revering saints beyond anything I imagined. Keith was raised in a parochial school system, and he says the subject of saints was always part of his landscape. When he was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, he traded "holy cards" rather than baseball cards. These were trading cards featuring pictures of saints with special prayers and biographical sketches. I grew up with cards featuring pictures of sluggers with batting averages and a record of who they played for.

Keith grew up in Wisconsin and I in Michigan. But there's more than a great lake that separates his childhood from mine. We grew up in different worlds.

But whether holy cards or baseball cards, these trading cards both work sort of the same. They're aspirational. A child gets a card and imagines they might some day be like the person depicted there. But very few children – hardly any at all – will ever "make it" (whether "making it" means becoming a big-league athlete or a bona fide saint).

My friend put it like this:

I learned that saints could be examples of living a holy life, they could show us how we too might live that kind of life. But I also got the impression that they were somehow people who lived perfect lives and I knew certainly I could not do that. They always looked so pious on those holy cards. I thought if I could find a way to adopt that pious demeanor, I would be able to be considered saintly. It didn't work. <sup>i</sup>

Now I didn't grow up with those aspirations *per se*, but I suspect most of us can relate to that sense of never measuring up, never being perfect, never truly "saintly."

And if that's the case, I have good news and I have bad news ... and it's the same news: you're not disqualified. Our celebration of All Saints' Day is supposed to remind us that we are counted among the saints of God not because we've managed to lift ourselves out of the muck and the mire, not because we are exemplary or exceptional; we are counted among the saints of God because God reaches out to us when we are desperate and in need of God's grace.

That's a point I see wonderfully illustrated for us in this morning's gospel.

Mary and Martha and Lazarus had an especially close relationship with Jesus. In the last week of his life, as John tells it, Jesus left Jerusalem and found a safe space, a retreat of sorts, in their home in Bethany. Martha was the host that time, and Mary anointed Jesus' feet with perfume.

They're in the Bible. Jesus loved them. Jesus trusted them. Surely, they qualify as saints.

And yet they're not so very different from us.

I'll start with Mary. We hear from her first this morning. When Jesus arrives, she comes out to him and collapses before him, saying:

***Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.***

You can hear this as an affirmation of her faith, but I hear it more as a complaint, a bitter rebuke: "Why weren't you here?" she asks. "If you had behaved like a truly trustworthy friend, you would have made the effort to be here in time to heal my brother before he died."

She's angry and hurt, feeling uncared for, betrayed even. She wanted so much more than she got from Jesus, from God.

And then there's Martha. Mary's words were essentially an echo of what Martha had already said to Jesus. But Martha says more about her faith in Jesus. After saying she wished Jesus had come sooner, she adds, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

And yet her profession of faith is not, I think, as deep as her anger. Nor is it stronger than her doubts. After Jesus orders that the stone lying there at the entrance of the tomb be rolled away, Martha is horrified. "God will give you whatever you ask," she'd said, but don't ask for this.

And then there's Lazarus. Very much a passive saint, I suppose.

In the lovely language of the old King James Bible, after Jesus tells the onlookers to take away the stone at the entrance of the tomb, Martha protests, saying, "*But Lord, ... he stinketh!*"

Rick Morley, an Episcopal priest and writer, says this isn't merely a story about Jesus and Lazarus; it's about you and me, as well. "Because," he says,

... we are all Lazarus.

We are all dead and lifeless. We are all wrapped up corpses ... We are stiff and we have all begun to smell a little rank.

We stinketh.

Until – until! – Jesus calls us out of the tomb. Until he orders everything that binds us and holds us down, to be stripped off of us and tossed aside. Until he breathes his holy breath into us again and makes us a new creation.

The Body of Christ, the community of the baptized, and the Communion of Saints – we are all Lazarus. We stinketh, until Jesus calls us out, frees us, and gives us life. In fact this is what binds us together, the biologically alive church and the biologically dead church: we have all been called out of the tomb and unwrapped.

In this sense, the raising of Lazarus isn't just a miracle that Jesus performed thousands of years ago in a land far, far away. It's the work of Jesus today. <sup>ii</sup>

I'm willing to count them all – Mary and Martha and Lazarus, too – among the saints of God.

And if we can count them among the saints of God, then surely there's room for you me:

- The saints of God, after all, are sometimes like Mary, which is to say ... impatient and disappointed in God.
- The saints of God are occasionally like Martha, as well, which is to say ... not always able to live up to the faith that's proclaimed.
- And the saints of God are at times like Lazarus, which is to say ... they stinketh.

For that matter, even the onlooking crowd (who never seem convinced about Jesus at all) get wrapped up in the call to be saints; even they have holy work to do. That's how it looks to me. For you'll notice that after Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, he turns to those looking on and commands them to pitch in and do their part: "Unbind him," Jesus says, "and let him go!"

They weren't asking for anything to do, but there was work to do all the same. Holy work, it seems. For it is nothing less than the holy work of the saints of God to set another person free.

Nobody in this morning's gospel is disqualified from holy work, the holy work of giving voice to our anger and disappointment (and working through them), of hearing the gap between the word we say and our confidence (and moving past any doubts and all fears), of rising up to live again, and of pitching in to do what we can when the world needs us to respond.

And I think that, in the final analysis, is the real point for us to attend to today.

If we have been brought up to imagine that the saints of God are a different kind of human being – **not** like you and me – we need not bother much with them. We can revere them, maybe even collect trading cards that talk about them, but we would be crazy to imagine that we should try to emulate them. As my friend discovered so very long ago, trying to adopt a falsely pious manner won't work.

But if the saints of God are more like you and me than we were led to believe before, then we can sing a song of the saints of God, singing to "be one too!"

Even in the midst of anger and hurt, of doubt and insincerity, of lethargy and inaction, God comes and invites us to rise up and start living again. Any work we do thereafter – our daily routines and our daily living – may be shot through with opportunities to live and love again.

And when all is said and done, responding to that call to rise up that we might live and love again defines the work of the saints of God in any age, especially our own.

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<sup>i</sup> Keith Whitmore @ <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002855/view>.

<sup>ii</sup> Rick Morley @ <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/2025>.