

Celebrating the Saints
Matthew 5:1-12
November 2, 2008

This morning we are celebrating All Saints Sunday. You may wonder why a Protestant church is recognizing this day when we do not canonize saints as does the Roman Catholic Church. I want to offer a brief history of the day and then suggest why we celebrate it today.

All Saints Day began with the early church's desire to remember and celebrate its martyrs. Martyrs are people who were killed because of their faith. Some of them were thrown to the lions, others were tortured and hanged, all because they refused to bow down to any god or person other than Christ. They were punished for this by the Roman Empire, where worshipping Roman gods was inseparable from Roman political domination. In refusing to bow to the emperor, the Christians were rebelling both religiously and politically, whether they meant to or not. Consequently many were killed as martyrs.

We don't think much about martyrs these days. We are privileged and blessed to live in a country where we have freedom of religion. But the early Christians experienced no such luxury, as many people of faith around the world today do not experience that freedom.

In the first centuries of the Christian church, it was risky to be a Christian, for the proclamation of faith in Christ could result in persecution. As Jesus was crucified, many of his early followers also lost their lives, although many of their names are lost to history.

All Saints Day originated as a feast of All Martyrs sometime in the fourth century. That was about the time that the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and embraced Christianity as a state religion. This hailed the end of persecution and the beginning of a more comfortable era for Christians. In looking back on the first four centuries of Christianity, perhaps the church hoped that in honoring past martyrs as saints, they would remember an era of pain while moving forward into a time of peace. This is how the festival began in the fourth century.

The date of the feast has moved around. In the beginning it was celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost. It came to be observed on May 13 when in the 600's Pope St. Boniface IV restored and rebuilt an ancient Roman temple, the Pantheon. Pagan Rome had dedicated that temple to "all gods," but now it was to be used by the Christian Church. The pope re-buried the bones of many martyrs there, and dedicated the church to the Mother of God and all the Holy Martyrs on May 13, 610.

About a hundred years later, Pope Gregory III consecrated a new chapel in the basilica of St. Peter to all saints, not just to martyrs, on November 1. He fixed the anniversary of this dedication as the date of the feast. This marks a move away from simply martyrs to include a larger group of faithful Christians.

A century after that, Pope Gregory IV (827-844) extended the celebration of All Saints to November 1 for the entire Church. All through this time it was not a feast for one particular saint in the Roman Catholic tradition, but rather a day to honor the multitude of faithful saints.ⁱ

Skip ahead to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Protestants retained the feast of All Saints, but had a different interpretation of sainthood. In the Roman Catholic tradition certain individuals are beatified by a process in the hierarchy of the church. In the

Catholic tradition certain persons are known as St. Paul and St. Augustine, among others. As recently as October 12 Pope Benedict canonized four new saints.

In the Protestant tradition, sainthood is not reserved for a special few. It is what all Christians go on to achieve after their lives on earth are complete. That is why we even as Protestant Christians celebrate All Saints Day. It is a day to remember all those who have lived well and honored God in their lives. It is a day to give thanks for what Christ has done in and through the witness of the saints throughout the ages. We rejoice in our spiritual forebearers in whom God's grace was working the same transformation for which we hope.

All Saints Day was John Wesley's favorite holiday. Perhaps it was because he would remember his mother, Susanna, who was a strong source of spiritual nourishment for him. And his father, Samuel, also a priest in the Church of England, in whose footsteps John followed. In remembering the saints we draw close to them once again and receive the blessings and grace of God which shone through their lives.

It is important for us to mark All Saints Day because our culture is not friendly to those who grieve. We don't allow people the time and space they need to grieve. Most workplaces give only three days of bereavement leave. In the social world, we don't really know how to treat one another after the first few weeks or months have passed. We expect people to "snap out of it" and get on with their lives. Grief becomes the invisible calamity; we no longer wear black to distinguish the mourners. We simply try to move on. We look normal, but we are wounded on the inside.

All Saints Day is a reminder that we never simply move on. Our grief may lessen over time, it may change and take a different form, but it is always with us, which is not a bad thing. For grief is the price we pay for loving. Grief for the dead is the cost of living deeply and loving well.

If we keep to ourselves and live in isolated bubbles, we grieve the loss of no one. But when we live connected to one another, we run the risk of having our hearts broken one day. Broken hearts are the cost of having big hearts. If big hearts lead to broken hearts, I would still vote for a world of big hearts in which we love one another despite the risk. The blessing of love for family and friends enriches our lives beyond measure.

Victor Hugo's classic, *Les Misérables*, is a story of grace, love, and redemption. In the final scene a dying Jean Valjean is surrounded by Fantine and Eponine, two characters who died earlier in the story. Valjean is at the end of his life, someone who amidst the horror of the French Revolution, tried to do what was right and holy, especially to Fantine and Eponine, the two saints who are with him at the end. On stage together, they begin to sing, "Take my hand and lead me to salvation. Take my love, for love is everlasting. And remember the truth that once was spoken: To love another person is to see the face of God."ⁱⁱ

In their lives, in their love, the saints show us the face of God. We remember the saints to receive again of their love and to offer our gratitude and love.

Carlyle Marney was a Southern Baptist preacher from Charlotte. John Buchanan remembers a time in which Marney used the image of a house as a metaphor for a person. There are different rooms in the house that is you. There is a parlor where you welcome guests, a kitchen and dining room for eating, a bedroom where you sleep, a basement where you store your trash. The house also has a balcony, and on that balcony are the people who have exerted good,

positive, and gracious influences in your life. They are your balcony people. “Walk outside and look up and see who’s up there on your balcony looking down at you,” he suggested. “Wave to them. They are your saints.”ⁱⁱⁱ

All Saints Day is a day to look up on our balconies and see who is there cheering us on – parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and siblings, children and spouses, teachers and coaches, Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders, Scout leaders and preachers – the people through whom God’s light shone into our lives. In our prayer we will name those members of our congregation who have died in the past year and there will be an opportunity for you to name aloud or in silence those saints who hold a special place in your hearts.

When Daniel Boorstin was serving as Librarian of the Library of Congress, he appeared on a P.B.S. documentary with a box containing the articles that were in the possession of Abraham Lincoln on the night he was assassinated. There was a handkerchief with his name embroidered on it. There was a case for spectacles. There were a pocket knife and a little purse containing a Confederate five dollar bill. A final item was a newspaper clipping about a speech given by John Bright in which Bright said, “Abraham Lincoln is one of the greatest men of all times.”^{iv}

This was 1865, when few people would have agreed with John Bright’s assessment. Lincoln was vilified and impugned so intensely that many cheered upon hearing news of his assassination. Even those who agreed with him would not stand with him. Why do you suppose Lincoln kept that clipping on his person? I think he needed a balcony person to reinforce that what he stood for and struggled with was right. He needed the positive reinforcement of someone who believed in him and believed the best about him.

Walk outside today, my friends, and take a long look up at your balcony, at the saints through whom God’s light has shined and who continue to cheer you on in this journey of life. Remember the saints and be blessed by their presence in your lives!

ⁱ Lillian Daniel, First Congregational Church, Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

ⁱⁱ *Les Misérables*, lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer, based on the novel by Victor Hugo.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Buchanan, “Lofty people,” *The Christian Century*, November 15, 2003.

^{iv} Norman Neaves, Church of The Servant, Oklahoma City.

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