

All Saints' Sunday, Year B, 110412  
All Saints Episcopal Church

*In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Giver of life. Amen.*

Happy All Saints' Sunday!

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. We celebrate that we are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses." In this cloud are all the people who have gone before us—people recognized officially as saints, as well as people important only to us. We sense these people cheering us on from a balcony in the great beyond, bringing spiritual encouragement to those of us who are still in the race.

A little history first: observed as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, All Saints' Day was a time to honor those who had been martyred in the earliest days of the existence of Christianity. But once Christianity became more accepted, there were not so many martyrs anymore, and the observance of All Saints morphed into a time to honor those who had led extraordinary lives of holiness and dedication to God during their lives, but who had since died. They had been given the name Saint as a title - Saint Peter, Saint Agnes, Saint Joseph, Saint Mary Magdalene.

A second holy day, the Feast of All Souls, is the day after All Saints' Day. It was originally used in the Roman Church as a day to remember those who had died, who didn't have quite enough holy points to get themselves out of purgatory into heaven. During the Reformation, the day became more a day to remember those who died who didn't have a 'big' name. It was also merged with All Saints but later separated again during some of the more modern reforms of the various churches.

I, for one, am really glad that we don't believe in purgatory or any of that stuff in the Episcopal Church! And while we have both days as separate feasts, most Episcopal Churches I know of really combine the two anyway; today we remember those Capital S saints as well as all the faithful departed - whether they made a mark on the world or not - our relatives, our friends, the little old lady down the street. In this way we come into communion with "all the company of heaven" with whom we pray when we celebrate the Eucharist. This is the "communion of saints."

To be declared a saint in the Roman Church, a couple of things are required: 1) proof of a good and pious life and 2) evidence confirming this pious life through at least three miracles after death. (I guess that leaves all of us out!)

In the Episcopal Church, our list of those we honor and remember with their own special days increases every three years with names that are added at General Convention. Those names are included in the book, *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*, and we use that calendar in our weekly Wednesday eucharists here. The list includes monks and nuns, kings and queens, writers, apologists, soldiers, deacons, priests and bishops, musicians, poets and artists, missionaries, doctors, nurses ---- not, to my knowledge, anyone who was slain by a fierce wild beast ---- but obviously a wide-ranging group of people whose focus was on God.

Even though all the people in this book are dead as well, it is a mistake to assume that you have to be dead to be a saint. The truth is that there are living saints all over the place.

Consider Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.

Nelson Mandela was an anti-apartheid activist in South Africa who was arrested in 1962 and sentenced to life imprisonment. He spent 27 years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement. After he was released in 1990, Mandela was instrumental in negotiations that led to the establishment of democracy in 1994. As president, he prioritized reconciliation, combating poverty and inequality in South Africa. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, and is now retired.

Desmond Tutu, also from South Africa, was the first black Archbishop of Cape Town and the primate of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. He has been active in the defense of human rights and uses his high profile to campaign for the oppressed. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, a number of other peace prizes since then, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009. He is retired now, too.

But wait, there's more! In addition to celebrating all those who have gone before us, and those still living who are widely-known, we also celebrate our own sainthood and the sainthood of those who will come after us. We? Saints? How does that work? Well, one mark of sainthood is our baptism. In fact, all of us who have been baptized are already saints because all it takes to be a saint is to belong to God. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, "It is not a matter of being or doing good or wearing a hair shirt or even of working three miracles that can be documented for the

Vatican." What it is, is a matter of joining the Body of Christ.

Once you've been baptized, once you've shared the body and blood of Christ, you have all you need to be a saint. Of course, then you have a choice: to live as who you are, or not. God has given us the freedom to choose whether or not we will be the holy people God has made us to be. What does that mean, to be holy? It means to follow the example of Jesus, who calls us in our holiness to help in his mission to heal, to feed, to restore, to bring to life, to redeem.

It always comes back to this, doesn't it? We don't make this stuff up, you know. That's what's there, in black and white. But here's the thing: any work we do in faith can be called holy. Most of us will probably not get Peace Prizes in our lifetimes, or become President of our country or an Archbishop with a worldwide audience. But our faithful work here at home, in this city, in our neighborhoods, is as holy, as saint-like, as any other. Our work could be volunteering with the Scouts, providing scholarships for needy children to go to camp, creating a home where there is laughter, going to vote, visiting a neighbor who doesn't get out much, or befriending a kid at school that other kids pick on. There is nowhere in our lives where God isn't at work healing, comforting and restoring; if what we do is done in faith, then we are partners with God in bringing in the kingdom.

So this is what we are about today - recognizing our sainthood, remembering the saints who have gone before us and looking forward to welcoming new saints into the communion of all the saints. On this day it is highly appropriate that we are all gathered in one place, 8:00 saints, 10:30 saints, and saints we welcome as visitors to our home, old saints and new saints. Can you feel what a crowd is here with us? Parents, grandparents, children, friends - all are there in the balcony along with Dick, Robert, Wayne, Doc and Jim, Mary and Joseph and their boy Jesus, Peter, Agnes, Mother Theresa, Nicholas, Catherine of Siena, Nelson and Desmond and all the others you can name. Angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. And Bill and Ricky, Ayen and Kathy, Dustin, Wieu and Rachel - every one of us by name. All of us made holy by God through the waters of baptism, all of us related by the blood of Christ, all of us loved by them so that we can love others as we are loved, throwing our arms around the world, all of us together in the communion of saints.

Alleluia!