

All Saints' Sunday, Year C, 110710
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, who creates us, redeems us and blesses us. Amen.

Happy Feast Day to us!

Today is our celebration of All Saints' Day, allowed in the Prayer Book to be transferred, from the actual day of November 1 to the following Sunday. While not every church is celebrating this as their Feast Day, all churches can observe it as the time when we remember and honor the 'communion of saints' - those who have gone before us - a great cloud of witnesses.

On Facebook yesterday, there was a message that came to me from a group called 'People Who are Rather Fond of the Episcopal Church'. It was talking about the fact that today is All Saints' Sunday and asking people to post what would be happening at their various churches this morning. One person asked a question: "Is this the day when we read the names of all the dead people?" Someone answered yes and she wrote back, "Yuck!"

I have known for a very long time that today is about saints, and that saints are people who have died; and I know that we sometimes refer to 'Capital S' saints - you know, the ones who are famous (St. Mary, St Francis, St. Paul, Sts Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, etc.) - and 'Little S' saints - ordinary people like doctors, queens, shepherdesses on the green that you can meet in church or trains or shops or at tea. But I never realized until now, when I read that woman's remark, how important it is to understand that all of those who have gone before us are not something to say 'yuck' to, but they are all saints, and that we are connected to them - because all of us live in God's communion.

It is easy to have learned about saints - probably when we were in Sunday School - but without taking it particularly seriously. There's the English hymn, part of which I just quoted (number 243 in the old 1940 hymnal in case you want to know). Lots of us know it by heart, and we think it is cute and a little silly, but "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God" is part of our Anglican tradition and we sing it with gusto! And of course, here in the South, we also sing "O when the saints go marching in, Lord, I want to be in that number when the saints go marching in" and we don't always mean the football team!

A little more serious is the old story about the priest who was talking to a group of children about the things in the church - cross, altar, candles, etc. When he got to the windows, the priest said, "The people in these stained glass windows are called saints. Does anyone know what a saint is?" And a little boy said, "The saints are the ones that all the light shines through."

And then there is another hymn we will sing at the 10:30 service this morning:

For all the saints who from their labors rest,
 Who thee, by faith, before the world confessed
 Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blessed
 Alleluia, alleluia!

O blest communion, fellowship divine!
 We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
 Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.
 Alleluia, Alleluia!

And if those things don't persuade you that we - all of us - living and dead - are connected by the love and fellowship of God, consider this: If you have been here at All Saints for any length of time, you are bound to have heard either Jim or me talk about the resurrection of the dead, especially at a funeral. About how the Greek word for resurrection means 'to stand with dignity.' About how when someone dies, we are filled with grief, of course, because he or she is no longer with us. About how we are also filled with joy because that person has been raised up to stand with dignity once again, in the communion of saints.

All of these things I have known in my head for a long time, but not so much in my heart until nearly two weeks ago now. As many of you know, I was with my sister in Atlanta, keeping vigil with her and many friends and relatives for her husband, who was dying of leukemia. On the day when the decision was made to stop all the medicines and treatments that would not cure him, but only prolong his death, we gathered around him in his ICU room. Brian was not conscious, but Martha and one of the priests from church, the organist, several choir friends and his brother and sister and I encircled him. Sharon, the priest, led us in prayers, and Brad, the organist, led us in singing wonderful hymns. More prayers, more hymns. And then more prayers, more hymns. Then we told stories about Brian and said some more prayers. Pam, Brian's sister, suggested we sing the doxology. As we sang the last line, "Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost," Brian took his last breath.

I have never been with anyone else as they died. Before and after, but not as it happened. I know that we were in the room with more than just the people we could count - God was with us, as were the saints who have gone before - Brian's parents, Martha's and my parents, maybe some of your parents, too. And Brian was able to stand with dignity, was made whole again, right in that very room, as we sang him to heaven to become one of the saints himself.

There's nothing 'yucky' about that at all to me, and I hope not to you. So now I would like us to remember those saints who have gone before us in this past year from this church of All Saints:

John Hamilton
Nell Rutherford
Sara Lee
Gordon Jernigan
Neulen B. Green III
Elizabeth Neigel
Muriel Cherney
David White-Spunner

May they rest in peace and rise in glory in the communion of saints. Amen.