

All Saints' Sunday, Year A, 110611  
All Saints Episcopal Church

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

Happy Feast Day!

Today is our celebration of All Saints' Day, actually observed on November 1, but allowed by the Book of Common Prayer to be transferred 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.

Who is a saint? The first two definitions of the word in dictionary.com say, "1. Any of certain persons of exceptional holiness of life, formally recognized as such by the Christian Church, especially by canonization and 2. A person of great holiness, virtue, or benevolence."

Many of the saints are people who have died, but there are saints who are living in our midst as well. And while we often 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.) - there are also '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. We are, all of us, saints of God by virtue of having been created by God as part of God's family. God's love for all of us connects us, living and dead, in one communion, one fellowship.

All Saints' Day celebrates those whose good examples remind us of what we can be at our best. The stories of their lives remind us of who we are, what we believe, and what we can become. They remind us how closely a human being can follow the example of Jesus. They draw us forward, give us courage, strengthen us to do God's will, and lead the way. Their good examples remind us that God reaches out to us with grace and love and care.

The saints inspire us not to lose sight of the ultimate goal: Jesus' imperative to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Remembering the witness of the saints allows us to continue to hold them close and can give us strength whenever and wherever we stand.

Remembering the witness of the saints can help us feel *God's* comforting touch when we are discouraged or sorrowful and can help raise us up when we fall.

In our *Godly Play* classroom, there is a module about the saints that we used during Vacation Bible School this past summer. There are 12 saints in this module - one for each month of the year - although there are 'hundreds of thousands still.' In the course of learning about some of them, I was struck by the simplicity of their lives and of the things they did that earned them 'Saint status.' I'm going to tell you what we learned about them. Listen to what they did; you don't have to copy their lives, but if you 'mean to be one, too' there is probably something in this list that is a gift you have as well.

There's: St. Thomas, who thought for *God*.

St. Valentine, who loved for *God*.

St Patrick, who traveled for *God*.

St Catherine of Siena, who showed people how to be fair for *God*.

St. Julian of Norwich, who was quiet and wise for *God*.

St. Columba of Scotland, who loved books and people for *God*.

St. Elizabeth of Portugal, who was peaceful and made peace for *God*.

St. Augustine, who was restless and found rest in *God*.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who cared for the sick and poor for *God*.

St. Teresa of Avila, who was strict, but laughed for *God*.

St Margaret of Scotland, who cared for her own children and the people of her country for *God*.

St Nicholas, who gave gifts for *God*.

Now, we aren't going to know every saint's story, but we do know *Jesus'* story, just as they did, and that is a powerful connector. It is a connection that is never lost or weakened, even though they are not present on earth with us. The gospel accounts tell us about *Jesus*, so we know of him in the historic sense, but our faith is what connects us with the mystery of life in *Jesus*. We hear the gospel stories about Him and stories of the saints' encounters of Him and know our own stories, all of which are part of this greater story of life.

In my reading this week, I ran across a description of some of the Scandinavian churches in the northern plains of this country - North Dakota, Minnesota. It seems that in their sanctuaries, the altar rail is a half moon shape - half of a circle that encompasses the area in 'front' of the altar. The idea is that the current

congregation gathers around the visible half circle rail, while the circle is completed beyond time and space by those who have already died. The wholeness of that transcendent circle of all the saints makes a beautiful and powerful statement about the faith we profess and the hope to which we cling.

We may not have a circular altar rail here in this building, but we are surrounded by the saints on the reredos behind our altar. And every time we come to this altar to participate in God's holy meal, we remember Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and in turn, are "re-membered," brought together, united in the Body of Christ. United in our common faith and story. And this re-membering, this unity, transforms us, so that we may go out renewed and strengthened by the knowledge of our belonging to God and of those who came before us and will come after us, belonging to God, too.

So 'rise up, ye saints of God! Let this time together prepare us all to be the witnesses for God that we are called to be. Alleluia!