

For All the Saints
By the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – Nov.1 2020

Please read:
Hebrews 12:1-2
Matthew 5:1-12

There is something about All Saints Day that has always made me a little uncomfortable. I guess it has to do with the fact that the term *saint* conjures up images of some perfect person, a great spiritual hero of the past, whose shoes I could never fill, so different from me and so removed from my life. When we talk about a person being a saint, it doesn't necessarily bring to mind somebody you'd want to spend a lot of time with - someone a little too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.

So it took me a while to figure out just what the biblical stories were trying to tell me about the real saints, the historical heroes of faith: I discovered, to my surprise, they were real people like you and me; they might even be people whom you would like to get to know. It might seem odd to say but true: if you think saints are holy people removed from the good, the bad, and the ugly of life, then read the Bible.

In our passage from Hebrews, we read, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." The writer of Hebrews was referring to the great heroes of the Hebrew faith, those who had gone before. If we look back a little more closely at the great men and women of faith, we'd find that they are closer to us than you might think. Abraham, the father of faith, went through a time when he had so little faith that he passed his beautiful wife off as his sister so he wouldn't get killed by the king who wanted her. Sarah, his beautiful wife, was chosen to be the mother of the child of God's promise, but when she heard about it, all she could do was turn in utter disbelief and laugh out loud. Moses, the lawgiver, started his career by murdering an Egyptian; David, the poet king, arranged the death of an officer so he could marry the grieving widow. Samson - well, you know about Delilah. And Jeremiah, who complained to God that he was too young, or too old, or too tired, or too depressed, or too public, or too isolated to be much of a prophet.

The New Testament keeps the picture rolling; you have Peter, the denier; Mary, the prodder; Paul, the persecutor; Martha, the controller; doubting Thomas, and impulsive Magdalene; and uptight James. Any of the disciples are most notable for their fickleness and foibles, their alarming deficits, and delinquencies. They may look holy in stained glass, but up close, they were as broken as the rest of us.

You may have wanted them as perfect, but there in the biblical pages are your saints, as petty and pathetic as they can be. We look back to them today, not because of who they were, but because of who God called them to be and how they responded to the call. We look back to them to see how God's salvation got worked out in their all too normal and sordid lives.

Some of you have asked if I heard the story about when Guthrie Speers, founding and building pastor of this sanctuary, saw during construction a foreman criticizing one of the workers for some of these odd and misshapen bricks, saying he should fix them. Guthrie overheard and immediately intervened saying, "No, leave those broken and odd-shaped bricks exactly as they are! They are beautiful because they are just like the members of this

church, all different and some, well, you know, broken, but beautiful in God's eyes!" And so, we have this wall full of imperfect bricks, reminding us that we too are imperfect people, but beloved of and called by God to change the world.

Something we tend to forget is that none of those bricks stand alone. We are all inextricably linked. Did you know that nowhere in the Bible is anyone person by him or herself ever called a saint? Throughout the Scriptures, the word saint is always used in the plural. In the Old Testament, the term saints are always used to refer to God's people, a nation chosen and called by God, set apart for God's purposes in the world.

In the New Testament, Paul will speak of the people to whom he writes as the "saints" in Jerusalem, the "saints" at Corinth, the "saints" in Rome, and send greetings with the "saints" who are with him when he writes a particular letter. They are all, he says, "called to be saints," never singular saints apart from the rest of the community. So, the Biblical way to use the word saint happens to be *only* when we say, "All Saints," plural, the *communion of saints*, the whole people of God, past present and future, graciously called together by God.

None of us stand alone. No Christian is self-made, and so we celebrate All Saints Sunday to remember the believers of the past who have made us who we are. We believe only because someone - Abraham, Sarah, David, Ruth, Isaiah, Don, Marty, Daniel, Ethyle, Jim - someone who lived the faith before us and told us the story in such a way that we became part of it so that we were able to join this company called the saints. They told their stories with us in mind and placed into their stories their vulnerabilities because they knew that we were vulnerable too. In their stories, they shared their humanity with us; so that we would not forever fix them in concrete or stained glass but feel them walking and breathing beside us, as we walk and breath, and as we try and run the race that is set before us.

The author of Hebrews writes, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Once upon a time, my wife Kim used to run marathons. and her goal was to run the Boston marathon. One of her first qualifying marathons was in Portland, Oregon, and she was having a hard time with it. About halfway through the course, a friend of mine named Bruce Bolton, who knew what she would be going through, was waiting to see her pass by. When he saw her, he popped out of the crowd to run alongside her and ran about 10 miles with her. He made her laugh and gave her encouragement until just before the finish line, he quietly slipped back into the crowd. She finished the race strong, and yes, she qualified for Boston! It was a powerful reminder of how the tough races in life can't be run alone.

I think of the many family, friends, colleagues who have gone before us as *balcony people*. I look to them as both an example but also for wisdom and advice. I imagine them looking down and cheering me on, saying, hey Scott, a little more of this and a little less of that. None of them are perfect, but they've run the race, and they are testimony that we too, can run this race if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

We live in challenging times of the pandemic, of climate and economic crises for many people. This week's presidential election will be historic and there is a lot of fear around what will happen no matter who is elected. This is a very important time to remember that we are not alone. And that none of us can go the Christian walk, or run, alone. None of us are nor ever will be saints *alone*. We are the saints *together*, and we must look to one another for encouragement and support, for guidance and instruction, for forgiveness and healing, for understanding and acceptance. We will experience the fullness of God's calling and blessing to us as saints together.

One final note... In the Beatitudes, Jesus reminds us how the saints are blessed for suffering for what is good and true. The blessing of God is not because we earn it, but because God desires to give it. God has a heart for those who are broken and cast aside by this world. God wants to bless the poor. God wants to bless those who mourn. It's hard to imagine all the mourning of these past months with over a million people dying in the world from the pandemic, and numbers still going up, a million people dying alone. Isolated from loved ones. God wants to draw near to all those who mourn.

But God also wants to bless those who are merciful and compassionate, who show care for those who are broken financially and emotionally by the terrible inequalities in our world that have only been exacerbated by Covid-19. God wants to bless those who see the injustices of this world and are willing to march or vote their conscience to make changes for a better life and fairer world for all people. God also seeks to bless those who, when the dust settles, are willing to do the hard work of walking across the aisle and working together for a just and holy peace and a new unity for the common good, no matter what they may say about you.

So, later when we share in communion, remember the word *saints* is the best plural and that you are never alone! As we receive from the Lord's table, remember all those who have gone before us, our balcony people, and give thanks. When you eat the bread and drink the cup, remember that Jesus, the pioneer, and perfecter of our faith, was the one who made any of us misshapen bricks into saints. Ultimately, we look to him as our hero, as our guide, for we all are both saints and sinners. Around this table, remember Christ's call to the way of the Cross. The way of generosity and mercy, of compassion and care for our neighbors, even our enemies. May we remember all the saints, and for all the saints may we live our lives in a way that reflects God's love and justice for all.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer. Amen.