



The Company of Saints

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Feast of All Saints~ November 5, 2017*

Revelation 7:9-17

I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

1 John 3:1-3

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

If the church had a family reunion day this would be it—the day we get together and check in with those we know really well and those we kind of sort of know, including that weird old Uncle every family seems to have, and those we don't know at all. And we would remember all those in our family who have died—exchanging stories about what they did, who they were—laughing a lot and crying a bit as we do so. And we would take out the family photo album and look through it. Today, All Saints Sunday, we remember our family, all the Saints of God, those who show the works and ways of a God who is full of surprises. Because, though Hollywood probably wouldn't shoot it this way, most of the saints of the church were, are, a bit of a surprise, most did not come straight out of central casting, complete with permanent beatific smiles and perfectly polished halos perched on their heads. The saints look much more like those in the family photo albums we actually have here at St. Peter's, some on the bulletin board here in the church and some in the book of pictures of our children at home with the Jesus doll. In other words, the saints are a mixed bag of people who operate from mixed motives and behave in mixed ways, sometimes breathtakingly holy ways, and sometimes not so much.

We might start by taking out the photo of St. Paul, one of the greatest of the great—he started off as a fire breathing zealot who wanted to eliminate all traces of the early Christian church but then ended up as our greatest theologian and evangelist; the energizer bunny of the Church without whom things would look very different for Christians. Or perhaps we would take out that great shot of St. Peter, the rock on whom Christ built the church. Paul's and Peter's photos get taken out a lot, but if you keep leafing through the pages you find others, not so well worn. Like that one of Constance and her Companions, a group of nuns from New England who moved to Memphis TN. Less than 5 years later an epidemic of yellow fever swept through the city—more than half the city fled—but Constance and her Companions stayed put, caring for the dying—perhaps thinking that God would protect them from the virus, or perhaps not thinking about themselves at all. If you are in Memphis you can find them in Elmwood Cemetery where they were buried after they all died of yellow fever.

And it would be hard to resist that photo of St. James the Greater who, on his way to death was so full of love and grace that the guard who was assigned to him converted to Christianity on the spot and they ended up being executed together—their last words an exchange of the "peace", the same peace we exchange before the Eucharist.

But, as I said, not all the photos are of perfectly holy folks. Take St. Christopher, for example, about whom many of us know the legend that he carried the Christ child across a swollen river, but who was originally on his way to work for the devil when a mysterious hermit recruited him to work for God instead. Or St. Mary of Egypt who was a prostitute for 17 years before she became one of the desert mothers—those great mystics who lived simply, communally, and were revered for their wisdom and grace.

Generally speaking, the saints are distinguished not by their goodness, but by their passionate love for God—which shines brighter than anything else about them. Fred Buechner has said that saints are like God's handkerchiefs, dropped on the world to remind us of the presence of the holy. I think he is saying that saint-making is more God's business than our own, and that there were and are extraordinary men and women whose love of God has led them to do extraordinary things. Which, when you think about it, puts sainthood within the reach of all of us. Even the most humble and obscure. And, here's an exciting news flash, you don't have to be dead to be a saint. Yes, I know that in the Roman Catholic Church that is one of the requirements, but I don't think God pays a whole lot of attention to the rules of the Roman Church, or any Church for that matter. I think the very much alive Desmond Tutu and William Barber have a pretty strong claim to sainthood. And here is another exciting news flash, you don't have to be famous to be a saint either.

So, what is it that makes a saint? Extravagance. Excessive love, flagrant mercy, radical affection, exorbitant charity, immoderate faith, intemperate hope, inordinate love. None of which is an achievement, a badge to be earned or a trophy to be sought; all are secondary by-products of the one thing that truly makes a saint, which is the love of God, which is membership in the body of Christ, which is what all of us, living and dead, remembered and forgotten, great souls and small, have in common. Some of us may do more with that love than others and may find ourselves able to reflect it in a way that causes others to call us saints, but the title is one that has been given to us all by virtue of our baptisms. The moment we rose dripping from the holy water, as Simon, Harry, Carter, and Camille are about to do, we joined the communion of saints, and we cannot go back any more than we can give back our names or the blood in our veins.'

So All Saints' Day is a family reunion indeed, of a clan made kin by Christ's blood. There are heroes and scoundrels at the party, beloved aunts and estranged cousins, relatives we adore and those who plainly baffle us.

* Brown Taylor, Barbara, *Weavings*, Sept.-Oct. 1988, pp. 34-35

They are all ours, and we are all included. On All Saints' Day we worship amidst a great fluttering of wings, with the whole host of heaven crowding the air above our heads. Paul is there, and Peter, and Francis, and the

Virgin Mary, Constance and her Companions are there, along with Christopher, and Absalom plus all those whom we have loved and lost during the year: Dorothy, Emily, Ernie, Cara, Hal, Frannie. Call their names and hear them answer, "Present." On All Saints Day they belong to us and we to them, and as their ranks swell, so do the possibilities that open up in our own lives. Because of them and because of one another and because of the God who binds us all together, we can do more than any of us had dreamed to do alone. Simon, Harry, Carter, and Camille: welcome to the family.