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SPG#219, All Saints B

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Wisdom 3:1-9

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

In recent years the Feast of All Saints has assumed a somewhat ambiguous atmosphere. But prior to that time, it was perhaps easier to celebrate the saints of the past because the so-called saints of the present seemed so perfect with unquestionable integrity. But then, as the truth came to light, as some church leaders were identified as perpetrators, many realized that the saints of the present were not perfect. It became easier to suspect that even the saints from the past might not be perfect as they had lived in less critical, and therefore less truthful, times.

That kind of perception runs headlong into our celebration of the saints where we lift up certain people as being models of integrity and service. It probably is more tempting to be cynical outside the church than in it. For, in my case, in the church, I have known saints. Next week, after 10:30 church, we will inter the cremains of Bill and Betty McKibben. When I think about both of them, I do not know what else I would call them other than saints. Tomorrow, at Grinnell United Methodist Church, we will celebrate the life of Reba Postels. In listening to her family speak of her, and after having known her for a while, I do not know what else I would call Reba than a saint.

In recent months, as I have spent time with our Confirmation class, I have come across other saints in the scripture. Alex Dill has told us about the boy David, who killed the giant Goliath, with a slingshot. TJ Hawley has told us of the prophet Jonah and his experience in the belly of a fish.

Samantha Bates has told us of Abraham as he negotiated with God to spare people in an Old

Testament city. And Kevin Emge has told us of Jesus himself, who spoke of the peace that comes from above.

In my own faith in 2009 I have been deeply impressed by the Apostle James and his unequivocal proclamation of the faith. And I have been impressed again with Ignatius of Antioch, who more than likely first had the idea that the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ could actually be written down and conveyed in words.

Today we celebrate that all of them that I have named and many, many others, are our sisters and brothers in Christ. All Saints Day is a glimpse at the wider, deeper reality of the Communion of Saints.

That simply means that in Christ the barriers of time and space fall away leaving a family in all times and in all places who confess their faith for God in Jesus Christ. It is the wider Body of Christ. It is the Church Universal. In the Prayers of the People we will say the names of people, who have been prominent in our lives, who have passed away. It is a way of remembering Mom or Dad, or Grandparents, or husband, or wife, or relatives, or friends. But it is also a way of remembering that ministry is built on ministry. Did you ever think that the parenting your parents provided to you was their ministry to you and the church?

The efforts we make in this parish are built on the efforts of other Christians who were called to ministry in other ways and in other times. It is a way of remembering that those who have passed on still encourage us in our own ministries. And somehow in the Body of Christ, we are mysteriously connected to those who are yet to come. We ourselves are the building blocks upon which their ministries will be built.

And so, in faith we reach for them who lived and worked and served, and rejoiced, and cried, who feared, who were brave, who were confused and clear headed, who were strong and weak, who sometimes loved, and sometimes did not care, just like us. And they reach for us. And we, who in all times and places serve a risen Lord, come together as the Body of Christ.

In these days when the Roman Catholic church has issued an invitation to “disaffected Anglicans,” or primarily those Anglicans who are unhappy with their membership in the Episcopal Church in the United States, I think of Thomas Cranmer, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, compiler and editor of the first Prayer Book in 1549. When he lived in the time of the Reformation, there was strong reaction to the “Roman Catholic” way of doing things. It was a time when people were moving away from communion, moving away from traditional liturgies. At the same time, it was a time when out of defense, Roman Catholics became more Roman Catholic.

Cranmer embodied the best of both worlds. The 1549 Prayer Book is evidence of that.

Thus, he laid the groundwork for Anglican churches that would equally appreciate word and sacrament, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Table. Cranmer was persecuted for his beliefs. After being imprisoned, he was burned at the stake.

For many of us the Communion of Saints is a difficult thing to grasp. Our culture is more accustomed to delineating spaces and differences between people as opposed to togetherness, or as opposed to communion. But behind our false divisions of age and sex and class and race is the deep current of togetherness and communion that God intends for us. In that togetherness, in that community, there is a place for each of us and all of us, past, present, and future.

If we continued reflecting on all the saints in this way, eventually, perhaps we could let go and catch a glimpse of hundreds of people who have lived and worked in this place. Then perhaps we could realize that we are not just surrounded by walls and ceiling here. We are surrounded by a countless throng of the faithful, or as the writer of Hebrews calls it, a great cloud of witnesses. We ourselves in our lives in the 21st century are connected to and caught up in this cloud of witnesses.

For this larger Body of Christ the topics of the day are love and service, commitment and ministry, peace and justice. With an appreciation for the larger body one can see how a decision made by one of the saints became a building block for someone else who built on that decision.

So, yes, the decisions that we make here about commitment and service, about stewardship, will have ramifications in our own common life but in the larger common life of all the saints.

For those of you who are present here, who love and work in this place, in this community, I will think of you as saints, unless you get in my face, where I can see your mouth move, and convince me otherwise. And let us celebrate what we do in this church in these days. With so many saints past, present, and future, it would be easy to think of ourselves as insignificant in comparison. And yet one of the rock solid truths of All Saints is that everyone has a place. Everyone has an importance. Everyone has a uniqueness.

So, let us without reservation step into the world of all saints where we know that our work is built on the labor of those who have passed, where we know that others will build on what we do.

Let us celebrate the truth and the glory of the cloud of witnesses. Let us celebrate the truth that each one of us has a place. Each place. All the places. Each ministry. All the ministries. Each saint. All the saints. Amen.