

SPG#186, All Saints

November 2, 2008

Revelation 7:9-17

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

As a preacher, one of the most common things I do is to recount the story of a biblical figure and attempt to open the doors between that person's life and ours. And we are fond of considering what a person in the Bible stood for and how that understanding might impact our lives. From time to time in sermons, and in other settings, I have put before us the possibility of a more imaginative approach to encountering biblical figures. That approach would have one of us focusing on a specific person out of the scripture as we went about our daily lives. For example, one of us could invite John the Baptizer to go with us to McNally's as we shopped for groceries. Or one of us might invite Moses to go with us to the Post Office. Or we might go further and ask that one of them or another would spend the whole day with one of us. The issue would be in any case, how much more would you know about Moses after having deliberately spent time with him? The challenge would be to keep your imagination open, to realize that he is with you because you invited him. And so the tasks would be to keep your heart and mind open through the time, and to give yourself time at the end to reflect on how it went. You might even structure in a conversation with a friend at the end that would help in your reflection. I would not call this method Bible study as much as I would call it Bible experience. Most of us are not used to that kind of integration. But it is as possible as you are willing to make it. In a time when you were considering your own commitment, what if you spent time with the Deacon known as Stephen, who was stoned to death because he openly stated his faith? What if you spent time with Peter? In a church named St. Paul's, as we read from his letters through many of the weeks of the

church year, it probably is unavoidable that we would meet the apostle himself in some forms and fashions.

But today is different. Today we celebrate that all of them 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. Local congregations remember and sometimes say the names of people in the parish who have passed away. It is a way of remembering that ministry is built on ministry. Today, in the Prayers of the People, we will do that. It is also a way of recognizing that 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, huddle together as the Body of Christ.

One of my favorites is Julian of Norwich, who in the 1200's in England spent most of her days in a room, or a cell. On one side of the cell was a church where she partook of communion daily.

Through an opening she could see into the church. On the other side was the world which she could also see through a window. She would talk to people through that window as they came to seek her counsel and her insight. She lived in a time when many were dying of the plague. Yet, she was known for saying, "All will be well, and every kind of thing will be well."

Another favorite of mine is the patriarchal figure of Samuel. As a boy, as he stayed in the temple with the old priest, Eli. One night as he was in bed, God called him, "Samuel, Samuel." Samuel thought it was Eli calling him, and went to him. This happened a couple of times until Eli realized that God was calling Samuel. He said, If he calls again, say "Speak Lord for your servant hears." When God called again, Samuel said, "Speak Lord, for your servant hears." Many times as God speaks to us in our lives in the events and encounters of a day, we may not hear. Or we may be confused by what we hear. Whatever attitude you happen to be in, to simply saying to God, "Speak Lord, for your servant hears," is an acceptance of God speaking to us in our lives.

Another notable figure in the communion of saints is 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. And many of us suffer from a sense of isolation and aloneness. 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.

What if, on All Saints' Sunday, that all of us who had some connection with St. Paul's – past, present, or future – What if all of us could gather here for worship? Can you imagine the kind of gathering it would be? There would not be room for us all. At this worship would be the ones who put up the money to build the first building. Some of them could tell us about what it was like to live through the Great Depression. We could tell them what it is like to live in the 21st century. We would hear about Stewardship campaigns in the past, and perhaps those to come. 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, please let me think of you as saints. And please 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. It was true for Samuel. It was true for Thomas Cranmer. It is true for you and me. It is true for all the saints. Amen.