

## Remembering the Saints

Whenever we celebrate a festival Sunday such as All Saints Sunday, the preacher faces the dilemma of whether to focus on the festival and its meaning for the church or to focus on the Scripture readings and not pay attention to the festival or to try to find a balance between the two. Sometimes, it is easy to find this balance, while other times the sermon becomes more skewed to one or the other. Regardless, it is important to recognize the festival and note its importance to the church, especially All Saints Sunday.

To give a brief history of All Saints Day, it began in the early 600's when the Roman emperor gave a Roman temple to the church. The pope then removed all the statues of the Roman gods and consecrated the church to the saints. All Saints Day had originally been celebrated in the springtime but was changed to November 1 to coincide with pagan rituals that honored the dead. Recognizing that there were many who lived 'holy lives' and were martyred because of their faith, the church designated All Saints Day to honor these saints that had not been honored on a specific day. For Protestants, All Saints Day has been celebrated on the first Sunday in November, while Roman Catholics still celebrate it on November 1. There is much more detail to the history of this festival and more information can be found on the internet.

So, back to "Remembering the Saints."

Do you remember old cartoons where a character faces dilemma, and you would see an angel on one shoulder and the devil on other. Each one would make their case for why the character should make a particular choice. In a way, these cartoon depictions captures concept that we are both saint and sinner. Even in movies and songs we sometimes get a reference of a person being a saint or a sinner. The saint is often depicted as being too good, too boring, or even not being not strong enough to stand up

for themselves. On the other hand, the sinner has all the fun, makes things happen and are often idolized by others. Sometimes, the movies will show characters wrestle with being a saint or a sinner, facing a choice of which path to take. Christians recognize the 'both/and' concept of being both a saint and a sinner. Throughout the years, the emphasis had gone back and forth between saint and sinner.

Recognizing that in this life, that we are in a process of being transformed from a sinner to a saint, what if we concentrated on the saint part of us yet acknowledge that we are still a sinner? Actually, it is biblical to see ourselves as saints. In the New Testament, believers in Jesus who are still alive are called saints. The Bible tells us stories of processes - for example, during creation, chaos proceeds to order. Many stories of characters in both Testaments show a process of going from unbelief to belief. Today's second reading in 1 John hints at this process of becoming children of God.

The event that changed this process of becoming children of God to being children of God was Jesus' death & resurrection which has changed our status as slave to sin to child of God, freed from the bondages that simply following the law could not accomplish and also made us heirs to the kingdom. However, since we are still living on this side of the Second Coming, we still have that struggle of going back and forth between saint and sinner. We aren't suddenly 'perfect' in our belief & actions and the process of our journey of faith continues. Whenever the Second Coming happens, that is when we will assume the total identity of saint.

Many times, when we hear the word 'saint,' we think of a person who has died and led a holy life, one that was dedicated to following God's will and serving others with compassion. However, when we look at the lives of these saints, many had colored pasts before accepting Jesus as their Lord and following the Christian life. For example, Peter had a temper, denied Jesus during the Passion. Paul, before his conversion

persecuted believers in Jesus. The theologian Augustine was a womanizer and partier before coming to faith. It was reportedly said that he once prayed, "Give me chastity, but not now." We also think that a saint never had doubts about their faith, so it was quite a shock to many who learned that Mother Teresa had doubts while she was serving the needy in India. What we do learn when we look closely at the lives of those saints who hold a special place in Christianity is that we can find solace in that even these stalwarts of the Christian faith and even those in the Old Testament who were considered Godly and righteous as they struggled in their belief and following God does not mean that we will not struggle along that journey from sinner to saint.

Now for a few words about the Gospel reading. The passage for today is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, the first of five teaching discourses that are in Matthew's account. This passage is referred to as the Beatitudes and describes blessings to various people. One may wonder why this passage is included on All Saints Sunday. However, it takes a little explanation to see how it relates to being a saint. It had been described that to be blessed by God is to be touched by God. Part of this touching is that first, one must be noticed in order to be blessed. Here, Jesus is assuring those who find themselves in times of distress, in those times when they are walking through the valleys of the shadow of death; or find themselves doing what God want with little evidence that it is making a difference, that God does sees them, God notices them and then touches them with a blessing. So, if God sees us and blesses us, that means that God is present. It is the presence of God that makes something or someone holy. So, if we are made holy by God's presence and we trust in these and all the words of Jesus and in His sacrifice for us, then we are saints. It isn't our recognition of God's presence that makes it real, but it is our trust that it is real that allows us to do those things which God wants us to do.

So, it is appropriate that we recognize those who have lived in that presence of God and allowed God to make God's presence known to the world through them. As we remember the saints today, especially those who have been called home from our midst, let us also remember how it was that God touched us through their lives and the lives of all the saints through all of time. May we be guided by the Holy Spirit to see God's presence among us and lead us to live our lives as a saint.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/ThkHOU-wgrA>

Service: <https://youtu.be/NIKaGRJruXE>