

Rev. Jonathan R. Thomas
Nov. 1, 2015 All Saints (B)
Isaiah 25:6-9

Helping with God's Work

Coming to the Episcopal faith only in my adult life, understanding the place of the saints was a bit of a challenge for me. I just never really got them or their importance growing up. To be perfectly honest, I think the saints seemed to be almost a little idolatrous to me at first – having pictures and statues of them all around, honoring them with special days and prayers. Then I spent some time during seminary studying in Rome, where the influence of the saints was everywhere – church names, statues, stained glass, icons, famous artwork – you name it and there was some obscure saint there representing it. They ranged from the unique and unrepeatable – there is only one mother of God, to the great stories that I hope never become my story – saints martyred for their faith, dying while proclaiming the love of God, to the almost pedestrian and mundane – saints who showed hospitality to pilgrims by giving them water from their well, food from their storehouse, and shelter from the elements. What I came to appreciate about the saints though, was that their stories and actions were different, depending on what the situation called for, but they were all pointing the way to God and godly living in a very human way. Their stories might show a honed or distilled version of the godly characteristic - love, courage, perseverance, hospitality, but they always show a very human version of that characteristic lived out in a practical way in the real world.

Rome was a place where every church was like a grand cathedral - with vaulted ceilings and images of God way up there and me way down here. I was constantly reminded of how great and beyond me God was, and godliness seemed to me almost unattainable, almost not worth trying for as a normal, lowly person. The saints helped remind me that these are not just attributes of God, but characteristics that are humanly possible, and they give us attainable examples of how to live our lives in a way that reflects God's life inside of us, and helps us to make progress on a faith journey to God. And we put them up in stained glass windows, icons, and statues around our homes, because these are the constellation of stars that help guide us when we get lost. That's precisely why it is important to commemorate All Saints' Day. We all need to remember the great communion of saints, the cloud of witnesses, that support us, inspire us, guide us to faithful living.

The communion of saints is not only not idolatrous, it is one of the greatest inspirations and consolations that we have in our faith. We have a great banquet feast where we sit with all the great saints, both the universally recognized ones and the personal ones who meant so much to each of our own faith journeys, joining with us at the table, holding us up, encouraging us, reminding us what it means to follow God in this world, because that is what we are called to do and no Christian, no follower of Jesus gets a pass. That is why on this day we honor both the faithful we have lost from our congregation in the last year - those who helped show us the way and make us who we are, but we also celebrate new people coming to the banquet table to carry on the faith into the future and help us to realize the dream of God, because the communion of saints is across all time and generations.

In baptism we are all called, in every new generation, to take up our role of being saints - of making the presence and purpose of God real and tangible in our world. That is what our baptism is really about - making a public declaration that we will, with God's help, strive to be God's representatives on earth by proclaiming the good news of God, serving Christ in all people, and striving for justice and peace in the world, in ways that make sense in our context. You see, saintliness matches the moment. The stories of the saints often start off small before it gets to the part where they changed the world. They offered what they had in the moment to meet a need because maybe no one else could, but more often, simply no one else would, and they knew God would want them to do it, and it mattered, and history remembers them, and they light our path today. That's how saints are made - by being faithful with what you have in the moment. It is about using your resources to follow God, to make God present and real to those around you. It really is about answering the call – the call of God to godliness, but also the call of other people in need. Each day when we look to our guiding lights, those common and personal saints who have come before us and taught us about charity, love, gratitude, faithfulness, and godliness in our own lives, and take up their mantle and follow. We are all called to be saints in the Christian faith, that is what this day reminds us. It might be in any number of ways, but its being called All Saints Day reminds us that no one gets to escape the call.

At my last church, the Sunday of All Saints there was a saints' walk for kids during Sunday School. Various parishioners came through dressed as different saints to tell the children about those members of our Christian family - Patrick, or Paul, or Mary, or Nicholas. My job was introducing them all and I started by asking the children if anyone knew what a saint was. I love working with kids because you never know exactly what you will get. One precocious little boy raised his hand, and when I called on him, he stood up, and after taking a minute to collect his thoughts, he said, "I think saints are just people who help God do his work." All I could say was, "yes, that's exactly what saints are." People who help God do his work.

It frankly does not take a lot of vision to know how the world should be, how God wills it to be, the Bible lays it out for us again and again. Isaiah presents a beautiful image of that great feast laid out, where there is peace and plenty, no one suffers the dehumanizing indignity of hunger, everyone has a place at the table and the solace of friendship, and God is at the center and in every person present. But it does take a certain amount of vision to look out on the world as it is, and see the path from here to heaven, to see how your limited resources begin to pave that pathway, how your actions could begin to pull that revelation into this present space in a real and tangible way. On All Saints Day we hear again the call to Christlikeness, and remember that all God's children are called to be saints, that it is the job of all of us to realize, to actualize, Christ's vision for our world. It will take the effort of all Christians to make our world a place where God's throne could reside among us, to allow ours to be a place where the lamb could walk the earth and not be slain again, where there is no more hunger, but rather peaceful sharing, and the eyes of those who mourn have gone dry because there is no more cause for weeping. Where the saints of old step in alongside us and recognize our world as the place they had long dreamed of, and together we join in that heavenly chorus, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb." On this All Saints' Day, let us strive to commit to that dream, together. Amen.