

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY | NOVEMBER 6, 2022

DANIEL 7:1-3, 15-18 | PSALM 149 | EPHESIANS 1:11-23 | LUKE 6:20-31

Today, we're observing All Saints Sunday. In our tradition, the emphasis in "All Saints" falls pretty heavily on the "all." The saints are not just an elite group of people who lived uniquely gifted spiritual lives while you and I sort of muddle through the best we can. The saints refer to all the baptized people of God who gather around Christ's holy meal and are sent by the Holy Spirit to witness to God's mercy in the world. When we refer to the saints, we're not just referring to people like Mother Teresa or Oscar Romero, we're referring to people like you and like me. You can imagine it like the Baseball Hall of Fame, except everyone gets in on the first ballot.

But even this We're-all-saints-of-God idea leaves out something important. It's something we confess in the Apostles' Creed most weeks but don't often stop to think about. We confess that we believe not in a list of saints or a bunch of saints or a club of saints. We confess that we believe in a *communion* of saints.

The word communion comes from the Greek word *koinonia*, which we usually translate as "fellowship." God creates a community of people whose faith is deepened by the lives of others and who enliven the faith of their fellow neighbors as well. When we talk about the saints, we're not just talking about someone's private, individual relationship with God. The image here is not a hall of fame full of individuals who have nothing to do with one another. It's a tapestry of people that God has knit together. There are no saints who exist by themselves, only saints who live in communion with one another.

And this communion of saints has two defining qualities that shape how we live. And we see those most clearly in two of our liturgical rites.

The first is our funeral rite. There's a prayer that we use as part of the intercessions that includes the line: "Help us, in the midst of things we cannot understand, to believe and trust in the communion of saints." We ask God to help us trust that the *koinonia* of God is more powerful than the pull of death. Because Jesus has risen from death, we can trust that once we have been knit into this communion, even death cannot pull us out.

The communion of saints is not just a fellowship of the people in this assembly or this country or this denomination or even this time. It is a communion that transcends space and time itself. It even includes the dead. So, the first thing we can say about the communion of saints is that it is everlasting.

If you want a great image of this, look up Orthodox icons of the resurrection. You'll see that they don't depict Christ walking out of an empty tomb. It's Jesus standing on the doors of death and pulling these two people out of their tombs. Those two people are Adam and Eve. The symbolic meaning is that those two people include everyone. That there is nothing in all of creation, even the void of death, that is untouched by the body of Christ. Even when we lose people to death, they are still in fellowship, in *koinonia* with Christ. Because the communion of saints is everlasting, it means that we can live without fear of loss.

The second rite where we learn something important about the communion of saints is in baptism. If you've been to a baptism recently, you know that there's a part where the sponsors are asked a list of questions. One of those questions is: "Do you promise to

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nurture this [individual] in Christian faith as you are empowered by God's spirit, and to help them live in the covenant of baptism and in communion with the church?" What they are promising isn't just that they will take this person to church or that they will—to use a common but unfortunate phrase—“expose them to church.” They are promising to help the newly baptized grow in relationships with all the other saints of God. To be in communion with the church doesn't mean having your name on the parish register in my office. It means to gather at God's holy meal, to share in our common call to mission, and to offer our lives in serving of bringing other people into fellowship with the body of Christ.

If funerals remind us of how the communion of saints is durable and everlasting, baptisms remind us that the communion of saints is always changing, always evolving, always growing. To return to that knitting metaphor, there are always new strands being brought into this tapestry. There's never a point where you can step back and say, “It's complete and finished.” It's always growing and being made new.

Because the communion of saints is always changing and growing, we have the opportunity to shape it, to nurture it, and to strengthen it. I'm always struck that the people who exhibit the most joy in their service are almost always individuals who believe that their actions make a difference. They understand that they get to knit this big tapestry. So instead of saying, *The church needs to be more welcoming*, they say, *I can make sure people feel welcome here*. Instead of saying, *The church needs to pray for people*, they say, *I can pray with people*. And instead of saying, *The church needs to be more active in the community*, they say, *I wonder how my gifts can help meet the world's needs*.

The former see the weaving of God's grand tapestry happening somewhere else. By other people. At the church up the street. In the past. And so they are left feeling jealous, morose, or, worst of all, afraid.

But the latter see God's action happening right here. And so these saints are joyful. Not because their lives are particularly happy—they have the same problems as everybody else—but because they trust that the communion of saints is a dynamic and active fellowship, and God has empowered them to knit it together even tighter.

So today we give thanks for the saints who, even in death, are in communion with God. The saints who raised us in the faith, translated the scriptures, wrote our hymns, and entrusted us with a vibrant expression of God's grace. And we give thanks for the saints living among us who stitch the fabric of God's great love. The saints who show us that a life spent following Christ's call is worthwhile.

Life within and among this communion of saints is life free from the fear of loss and life open to the reality of joy. That's the life God promises us in Jesus Christ. And drawn together by the Spirit's tether, that's the life God enables us to give to one another.

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