

**All Saints Sunday yr A 2020 (St. Mark's, New London)
November 1, 2020
Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34: 1-10, 22; 1st John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-
12**

(Preached on Zoom because of the pandemic)

**Grace, peace and blessings to you from God our Father and the
Lord Jesus Christ**

**Little Sally was sitting with her family in church one Sunday
and staring at the beautiful stained-glass windows. There was one
that showed an image of St. John and one of St. Mark and another of
St. Luke, St. Francis and also St. Matthew. Later that day, as the
family gathered around the table for Sunday dinner the subject of the
saints came up. Someone asked how could they tell who was a “saint.”
Sally had been thinking about just that thing so she burst out with,
“Someone who the light shines through.”**

Not a bad definition. Someone who the light shines through.

The problem, however, is that we have come to equate the word “saint” only with those in stained glass windows. They are saints, of course, but they are not the only saints. St. Paul makes it very clear, in several of his letters to the churches he founded that the saints were those who accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and were committed to patterning their lives in accord with his teachings and example. Certainly, if a person did that the light of Christ would, most definitely shine through them.

All Saints Day is a Principle Feast of the Church and it is always on November 1st. A piece of trivia: because it is considered so important for the church to celebrate All Saints Day for the reasons

we will talk about, it is the only feast day that can be transferred to the Sunday after November 1st. You see, All Saints Day is not about the stained-glass saints. All Saints Day is about us, we ordinary folks doing our best, day after day to live according to way Jesus taught. And since it's about us, it means that our commitment to Christ doesn't change much by what we encounter day to day. There's an old Zen saying that goes like this: "Before enlightenment I chopped wood and carried water. After enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water." In other words, in the life of a saint, some things may not change at all on the surface. The most important changes are inward, the transformation of the heart.

The saints we honor today are not the St. Peters and the St. Marys of the faith. They have their own special day on the church calendar and rightfully so. They are helpful to us because they provide us with role models. We look up to them. They are like a compass for us to guide us in our walk with Christ through the dense thicket of this wonderful yet sometimes strange and painfully difficult life.

Jesus speaks of the marks of a saint in the Gospel for today. He says they blessed because they are poor in spirit. In other words, to Jesus saints are willing to acknowledge that their inability to save/rescue themselves. They need God for that to happen. And he says that a saint is one who “mourns,” that is, a saint has a deep sense

of their own sinfulness and inadequacies and is unhappy about them but they repent and they recommit to persevere in doing better the next time.

Jesus says a saint is also meek. The meekness Jesus is referring to is not a docile and a subservient approach to life. Instead, it refers to having a positive and confident attitude about being a follower of Jesus. It means that humility is a virtue because it seeks the best in others. A saint has a “hunger and thirst for righteousness” and for being “merciful.” There is no question that Christians are called to bear the burdens of those who can’t manage for themselves. This is why the church has always been deeply involved in supporting justice and doing charitable work in hospitals, shelters for abused women,

drug and alcohol rehabilitation, halfway houses for former prisoners or building homes for homeless or warming shelters and meals for those who have no place to go when it's cold.

One time I was speaking with a younger member of a church who mentioned that she had been challenged to name the heroes of her generation but she couldn't think of any. Maybe she was correct that no names stood out as prominent as may have been in past years. Maybe it's just a function of time before they are recognized. Yet there are many people who the church recognizes as persons whom the light shines through but who are not well remembered.

Take for example Absalom Jones. He was born a slave, taught himself to read using the New Testament and, after saving for and

eventually purchasing his freedom, he started St. Thomas church for African-Americans. The church applied for membership in the Episcopal Church and Absalom Jones was ordained as the priest in 1802 thereby becoming the first priest of his race in the Episcopal Church. St. Thomas Episcopal Church grew to over 500 members in the first year of its existence due to Fr. Jones' fervor in spreading the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Fr. Jones became known as the "Black Bishop of the Episcopal Church." He is an example for us of persistent faith in God and the Church as God's instrument. He has a Wikipedia page.

Or consider a group known as Constance and her Companions, AKA the Martyrs of Memphis. Constance was an Episcopal nun of

the Sisters of St. Mary. She and her companions had gone to Memphis, TN in 1873 to start a girls school. Five years later, in 1878, Memphis was hit by a yellow fever epidemic. The Cathedral and the adjacent girls school were in the center of the area most affected by the disease. Constance immediately organized a relief effort. She and the other nuns along with the Dean of the Cathedral and the cathedral staff worked to exhaustion to aid the sick. Eventually Constance, three other nuns and two priests died from the disease. They are memorialized by the beautiful high altar in St. Mary's Cathedral. You can find reference to her on the internet.

There are such people as Dietrich Bonhoeffer who stood up to the Nazis in WW II and was executed for his commitment to the brotherhood of all people about a month before the Nazis surrendered. Or there is John Henry Hobart, a bishop who, after the American Revolution, helped revive the Episcopal Church which had been decimated for being the church of the hated English. The Town of Hobart over near Green Bay is named after him.

Then there is one of my favorites: Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky. He was born a Jew in Lithuania, studied to be a rabbi but converted to Christianity after reading a Hebrew translation of the New Testament. In 1854 he immigrated to America and began studies as a Presbyterian minister. After two years he

decided to become an Episcopalian and after ordination as a priest he volunteered for missionary work in China. On the trip across the Pacific Ocean he taught himself Chinese and eventually translated the Prayer Book and parts of the Bible into Mandarin. He was made bishop of Shanghai in 1877 but resigned in 1883 when he was stricken with a paralysis. He was so determined to finish his translation that with heroic perseverance he typed over 2000 pages with only one finger of his partially paralyzed hand. He founded a university in Shanghai named – can you guess? – St. John’s University. He has a Wikipedia page and even though St. John’s University was broken up by the Communists you can still find it at sjuaa.org.

Who are the saints? Just look around. You see their faces on the computer screen. There they are. The saints. The congregation of the faithful. The Body of Christ. The fellowship of the Spirit. The community of hope. Ordinary people. The rank and file. Most are modest and undecorated except in the eyes of God. Most won't even be remembered but the church couldn't do without them. They – we – are the backbone of the church. We are what makes the Church come alive in the experience of our communities. Without the Church our communities would be far worse off for many reasons not the least of which is that we are the people who are making an effort to live up to the standards of God as seen and taught by Jesus Christ.

We saints are ordinary people who have entrusted our lives to an extraordinary God.

The challenge of All Saints Day is first of all to remember who we are in the eyes of God – good, decent people who are striving to live as God called us to live. Secondly, our challenge is to persevere in that quest. To never give up our hope in God because God never gives up on us. In that way we will always be the windows that the light shines through to the rest of the world. AMEN