

Celebrating Our Sainthood

Rev. Craig M. Sturm

Trinity Lutheran Church, Sherman Texas

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All Saints Sunday

The church liturgical calendar declares today as All Saints Sunday. It is the church's Memorial Day – a Sunday set aside to remember and to give thanks for all our loved ones who have died in faith: grandmas and grandpas, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, friends and coworkers.

When we realize that their physical presence is no longer with us, it is only natural to feel a sense of sadness and aloneness. And yet, God assures us that death and grief will not have the last word in our lives. To remind us of that promise, the sanctuary has been filled with memorial candles in honor of all of our loved ones who have finished their earthly journey. Although their home is now with God in heaven, the light of their lives continues to shine here among us.

All of our Scripture readings for today give us a glimpse of heaven. Isaiah gives us a vision of God gathering his people together in heaven for a great feast. And at the feast, God personally wipes away the tears from our eyes. Suffering and sadness is wiped away, and true peace, joy and salvation is experienced by all.

Revelation speaks of God making all things new, of a holy city where God's faithful saints abide, a place where death and sorrow are no more. Heaven becomes the new home for people who went through great suffering while here on earth, and yet kept the faith. They never gave up hope. They kept on believing that the promises of God can be trusted, and in the end they were not disappointed.

Now, in their new heavenly home, the saints rest from all their labors and trials. In the presence of God, the book of Revelation tells us, there is no hunger or thirst, no suffering or tears – only perpetual peace and joy. That is the Bible promise. That is our hope.

But to think of All Saints Sunday as just a remembrance day for those who have died is to miss its true significance. Sainthood is not just about those who have preceded us in death and who now live with Jesus in heaven sporting their sparkly crown of glory. Truth be told, All Saints Sunday is just as much about earthly saints as it is about the saints of heaven.

When we think of the word "saint," we naturally think of Christians who led extraordinary lives, people like St. Paul, St. Francis or Mother Teresa. But the biblical definition of a saint is simply a forgiven sinner – someone who has been named and claimed in the waters of Holy Baptism. That means that all of us – us normal,

everyday folk – are saints of God. Saints are people who have been redeemed, set apart, equipped to be witnesses of Jesus Christ in their daily lives.

When I think about my life, I realize that I have encountered some incredible saints of God.

I remember Ruthie Boyd Robertson playing a Bible trivia game with us kids. We all thought we were just having fun playing a game with friends. Little did we know that she was teaching us the basic truths of God's Word.

I remember Larry Lindsey, my band director in junior high who also taught my Sunday School class. Mr. Lindsey would always apologize for not knowing more about the Bible, but he was there every week, willing to spend time with us, and share his own personal faith joys and struggles. He impacted me more than he will ever know.

I remember Sheldon Albrecht who always started off every Sunday School class by asking what was going on in our lives. And then he would masterfully weave in Bible passages that spoke to our specific situations.

I give thanks for my parents who have always been highly involved in the life of the church. Their joy in serving the Lord through both service to the church and to the community rubbed off on me. What a priceless gift!

And how can I not mention my pastor of 20+ years, Pastor Haynes, who baptized me, confirmed me, who always made time for me, and who slung that loaded statement at me, "Craig, you ought to seriously consider becoming a pastor." I am the pastor that I am today because of the role model he was to me.

I continually find his way of doing things creeping in to my own ministry practices, and I can't help but smile, and give thanks for his faithful example, and his bold witness to the Lord.

I also remember so many college and seminary professors who were the best in their fields who did whatever was necessary to mold and shape me into a faithful pastor of the ELCA.

These are just a hand-full of the saints in my life who acted as faithful guides in my journey with Jesus. They were people who knew the power of God's love and the depth of his mercy and they wanted everyone else to know about it, too. And so they boldly shared the story of Jesus Christ in their own special way.

You will never read about these people in any church history book. None of them will ever have a special day set aside in the church calendar to commemorate them. No, they are just ordinary folks like you and me. But in their search to be faithful

followers of Jesus Christ, in their commitment to love and serve the Lord, they ended up touching my life in powerful ways which shaped me into the Christian pastor I am today. Those individuals are indeed faithful saints of God.

So what about you? Who are the people in your life who have had a profound impact on your journey of faith? Who are the saints in your life who have paved the way for you to come to know Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world?

That's the true purpose of All Saints Sunday – to provide an opportunity for us to remember and to give thanks to God for all those special people in our lives who have sown seeds of faith into our hearts. Such individuals are gifts to us from God. We are the beneficiaries of their dedication to let their faith light so shine before others.

One thing that every saint of God possesses is an undying love of the Lord, and a willingness to let the Holy Spirit use them in whatever way to allow the grace and love and generosity of God to become known among others.

Like a stained glass window in church depicting a saint of times past, what makes a saint a saint is their willingness to let the light of the Son (S-O-N) shine through them to reveal the glory of God.

On this All Saints Sunday, as we remember the special people in our lives, the challenge question we must each ask ourselves is this: “Will anyone remember me?” Will we be remembered by someone else as one who helped nurture and sustain their faith journey? On an All Saint's Sunday 10, 20, 50 years from now, will our name still be remembered as one who made an indelible mark on someone's faith journey?

Are we truly letting our faith light shine before others, or is it just a catchy saying that adorns our church T-shirt? Will we be remembered as someone whose faith was so transparent that it rubbed off on others? Will people remember us as someone whose words and deeds revealed without a doubt that Christ was Lord of our lives?

That is our calling as faithful saints of God. We are called to be people dedicated to living out our baptismal promise – to let our light so shine before others that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. Such a light expresses itself through love, forgiveness, generosity, servanthood, and gratitude. As saints of God, our lives must be characterized as being obedient to the teachings of Jesus Christ and committed to living out his ways in our daily lives.

Today, the saints of God have gathered together to worship and praise God because we realize that God is the source of all good things. We, the saints of God, have gathered believing that true forgiveness is possible through repentance. We, the

saints of God, have gathered today eager to hear what God has to say to us through his holy Word.

Today, we as the saints of God, have gathered because we hunger and thirst for the mercy and grace of God, given so freely at the table of our Lord with the words, “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” It is these simple yet powerful acts of God that validate our sainthood. It is these simple yet powerful acts that not only commission us but equip us to be saints of God out in the world.

So take a look around today. You will see a room full of saints. Not a room full of perfect people (heaven’s no!), but a room full of sinful people whom God saw fit to save and redeem through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Look around and you will see God’s game plan for saving the world. The saints of God – you and I – when we take our baptism seriously, will go out and in word and deed share the message of God’s mercy and salvation with all people.

As saints of God, let us go out and commit to make a profound difference in someone’s life, just as another saint of God made a profound difference in ours.

We have indeed been redeemed, set apart, equipped to bring near God’s kingdom here on earth. May God find us faithful as we strive to live up to our title, “Saints of God.”

And all God’s saints said, “Amen.”