

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
November 3, 2019
Title: Saints for Todayⁱ
Scripture: Ephesians 1:11-23

As we observe All Saints Day, we remember the people who are important to us but who no longer walk with us on this earth. All Saints Day was really a few days ago – on November 1st, but because it seldom falls on a Sunday, we often celebrate it on the first Sunday in November.

Growing up, I never thought much about saints. Unlike my Roman Catholic friends who talked about and prayed to some of the saints, that wasn't part of my religious background growing up in the Methodist Church. However, John Wesley, the person we recognize as the founder of Methodism, called All Saints Day a “festival I truly love.” He said, “I always find this to be a comfortable day.”ⁱⁱ

To be clear, Wesley did not find any reason to venerate or invoke saints, but he believed that the church was composed not only of those who are currently alive, but also all those who have gone before us, the great communion of saints.

All Saints Day then becomes a day to remember not only those famous ones who have gone before us, but also the more obscure – the ones known and remembered only by those in whose hearts they continue to live. The hymn we just sang speaks to this well.

As the hymn says, the saints of God are those who “toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew. ... They loved the Lord, ... and his love made them strong, and they followed the right for Jesus' sake the whole of their good lives long. ...”ⁱⁱⁱ

Does that sound like some of the people we have remembered today as we lit candles to remember those who have been an important part of our lives and who no longer walk on the earth with us?

As the song says, “They lived not only in ages past; there are hundreds of thousands still. The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus’ will. You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store, in church, by the sea, in the house next door; they are saints of God, whether rich or poor, and I mean to be one too.”^{iv}

Mister Rogers once told children that when something bad happened, his mother told him to look for the helpers. He urged children to look for the helpers – the medical people, the fire fighters, the people who help others. That’s one good definition of a saint, I think; someone who is a helper, someone who helps to make the life of another a little better. We are the ones who are called to be the helpers in our world, to be the ones who reach out to those who are suffering. We are to be the agents of God, the hands and feet of God reaching out in love to a world that needs to hear, feel, and see that love.

That may be why some of the saints we remembered today were so important to us. They were the people who were agents of God. They were the helpers. They were the ones who reached out to us and to others in many ways. They were the ones who made a difference in our lives and the lives of others. That’s why they were and are the saints in our lives.

The article I read about John Wesley and All Saints Day included these words, “Alongside the likes of Paul from the New Testament, Augustine, Martin Luther, and John and Charles Wesley, we tell stories of the grandmother who took us to church every Sunday. We remember the pastor who prayed with us in the hospital, and the neighbor who changed

the oil in the family car. We give thanks for the youth leader who told us Jesus loved us, the kindergarten Sunday school teacher who showered us with that love, and the woman in the church who bought us groceries when we were out of work.

“Retelling these stories grounds us in our history. These memories teach us how God has provided for us through the generosity and sacrifice of those who have come before us. The stories of the saints encourage us to be all God has created us to be.

“We think of the inspirational people with whom we worship on Sunday, and those across the world we will never meet. ...We give thanks for those with whom we agree, as well as those whose views we do not share. ... On All Saints Day, we recognize that we are part of a giant choir singing the same song. It is the song Jesus taught his disciples, a tune that has resonated for more than 2,000 years; a melody sung in glory and on the earth. Our great privilege is to add our voices to this chorus.

“On All Saints Day, let us give thanks for both the saints in glory and those on earth, who have led us to Jesus. As they have shared the gospel with us, may we add our voices so someone else may hear about the grace and love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”^v

As we celebrate Holy Communion today, we do so remembering that in that celebration we are also in some way united with the great cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints, those who are no longer here with us. Some of them may have passed on to eternal life; others may continue to serve God in other places. We are in a mysterious way, united with those whose spirits somehow are still part of us and part of this sanctuary. We may remember David Ripley, Ruth Robinson, Stan Cushing, Jean Russo-

Parks or other pastors who have spoken those words of consecration and institution at other tables of communion.

Today as we celebrate communion, there are several who are normally with us on Sunday mornings who are witnessing and celebrating some of the saints in a different way. Some of them are in Boston in the Purple Stride Walk helping to raise money to help combat and research pancreatic cancer. They do so in memory and celebration of two of the saints of this church – Pastor Jean Russo-Parks and Bruce Andrews. Today they are the church being with community to help change the world, to help bring hope to others.

The church as the apostle Paul knew it, in his letter to the church in Ephesus was made up of those who choose to hope in Christ. It was made up on those who chose to hear the word of truth and who chose to believe.^{vi} It was made up on people who took action based on that hope and became partners with God in creating a world where others may hope.

We are invited to be those saints who help bring hope to the world. This week a major new drug was announced that could turn cystic fibrosis – a deadly disease – into a manageable condition offering great hope and promise. Most of us will not be those to make this kind of discovery, but we are those who bring hope everyday to someone around us, even though we may never be aware of it.

In his letter, Paul prays for those in Ephesus. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase The Message, puts it this way. "That's why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love ... I couldn't stop thanking God for you – every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks^{vii}. But I do more than thank. I ask – ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory to make you intelligent and

discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for Christians, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him – endless energy, boundless strength!”

This week, Bishop Devadhar’s letter for All Saints quoted a book he has encouraged us to read called “Piloting Church: Helping your Congregation Take Flight”^{viii} He reminds us that it is not our job to do everything, or be everything, but to mentor, encourage, and equip others so that every person is able to do what God has called him or her to do.

I read this week that while Jesus calls all people, Jesus also calls each person individually and uniquely.^{ix} Some of the people I remember most as the saints in my life are those who encouraged me to be who God called me to be, to use the gifts God gave me and to be the best me that I could be – not to be someone else. At the same time, they did not walk away and leave me to flounder on my own. That is a gift that saints can give to one another.

When there is a lot to be done – as there often is – I think we are called to avoid two traps. One is to jump in and do everything, thinking either that we are the only one who can do it, or encouraging others to think that about us. The other equally dangerous trap is to stand by and do nothing expecting someone else to step forward, while we sit back and feel good about what we have done in the past and feel that it is now time for someone else to do what needs to be done. The first may get the work done but it doesn’t encourage, mentor, or equip other saints to use the gifts God has given them. The second, may unwittingly encourage others to fail if we fail them by not sharing what we have learned while encouraging

them to also use the gifts God has given them and put a new or different spin on something.

As we remember the saints in our lives, let us notice how they encouraged and enabled us to experience God's presence in our lives. Let us remember the saints in our lives and let us also believe that God calls us to be agents of change, agents of God, saints for others. God calls us to be the hands and feet of Christ in a hurting world.

Transcript:

A Prayer Meditation for All Saints Day

(Written by Safiyah Fosua)

We give you thanks, O God, for all the saints who ever worshiped you,
whether in arbors or cathedrals,
wooden churches or cement meeting houses.

We give you thanks, O God, for hands lifted in praise:
manicured hands and hands stained with grease or soil,
strong hands and hands gnarled with age,
holy hands.

We thank you, God, for hardworking saints,
whether hard-hatted or aproned,
blue-collared or three-piece-suited.

They left their mark for you, for us, for our children to come.

Thank you for the sacrifices made by those who have gone before us.

Bless the memories of your saints.

May we learn how to walk wisely from their examples of faith, dedication, worship, and love.^x

ⁱ Portions of this sermon are from last year's sermon by the same title.

ⁱⁱ www.umc.org What John Wesley thought about All Saints Day

ⁱⁱⁱ Scott, Lesbia in "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God", United Methodist Hymnal #712

^{iv} Ibid

^v www.umc.org

^{vi} Feasting on the Word, Cycle C, All Saints Day, Theological reflection on Ephesians passage.

^{vii} The Message Ephesians 1:14-19

^{viii} Cameron Trimble (Chalice Press, St. Louis, Missouri, 2019).

^{ix} Smith, Carol Ann & Merz, Eugene F. Moment By Moment – A Retreat in Everyday Life. Moment 11, included in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.

^x www.umc.org "A Meditation for All Saints Day"