
All Saints Sermon

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Feast of All Saints/ For All the Saints

A Sermon by The Reverend Paul J. Carling, Ph.D.

Episcopal Church at Yale

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Revelation 7: 9-17; Psalm 34: 1-10, 22; 1 John 3: 1-3; Matthew 5: 1-12

Good Evening Saints!

Today we celebrate *All Saints' Day*, so let's begin by naming the millenia – old confusion about “saints.” In scripture, “saint” comes from the Greek word *hágios*, which means “consecrated to God, holy, sacred, pious,” and therein lies the tone for our popular imagination – someone set apart, “holier,” with a direct line to God. They give up everything, beat their bodies into submission in order to keep their minds “set on things divine.” In the end, they welcome death – the more gruesome the better.

I must confess that as a teenager, I found all of this *exceedingly* attractive. I ADORED all my favorite saints – especially Francis. Here are two of my favorite images of Francis. I love him first because unlike so many others, he actually smiled a lot, and second because he spoke to the animals. Even now, every dusk, as over 100 geese arrive like clockwork, landing in the tidal creek outside our house, like Francis, I bellow over and over “Hello, geese!” with extravagant enthusiasm.

I LOVED all the saints – Mary, Joseph, Francis, Clare, Julian, and Ignatius – even Stephen, who we teens irreverently dubbed “the patron saint of pin cushions.”

So, it was a no-brainer that, like Saint Damien, I decided to spend my life caring for lepers on the island of Molochai... That is, until I fell in love with another teenager, and that, as my Brit friends would say, put paid to that.

One problem with these popular images of saints, of course, is that we tend to see these complicated human beings as larger than life, and we conclude we'll never measure up.

The second, and larger problem is that Jesus clearly calls ALL of us to be saints, to build up the Body of Christ, and to seek and serve Christ in all persons. But with these kinds of role models, we spend the rest of our lives feeling like we've come up short.

So maybe it's time for a reframe. The Book of Revelation describes saints simply as, “...*(those) who have come out of the great ordeal...*”

My beloveds, look around. Isn't it true that merely living as spiritual beings in a human world is a great ordeal? That privileged or not, the willingness to enter with compassion into the chaos of each others' lives is a great ordeal? Remember that the root of compassion is “to suffer with” and that sometimes that's the best we can do. Whether our journey is that of a mystic, or a Wal Mart shelf stocker, or a professor, if we choose to follow the prophet Micah and, “*do justice..., love kindness..., and walk humbly with our God,*” life is a great ordeal.

Some saints follow an ethereal path; many more live with their feet planted firmly on the ground, often not by choice. They see the world face to face as it is, and respond the best they can. They share in the suffering inherent in the human experience and, in the process, just try to be kind, and assume good will – to simply keep loving.

Consciously or not, these saints embrace a theology that sees all of humanity as interconnected, as mutually responsible, and in so doing, they keep alive the hope for a better world.

Last year, month after month, ECYers baked cookies and shared stories and made friends with our sisters

and brothers in the Chapel on the Green community. Now separated by a deadly virus, Kai and her team have picked up that mantle. And tonight, we just saw many of our friends' faces again on that video, friends who – every day – lack the security of housing and food or even basic respect, and yet friends who still have the strength and courage to talk about trying to survive on the margins; to advocate for themselves and *their* friends. In those faces, I see saints. When I see those who are willing – whether privileged or not – to take on the great social inequities of our day, not just with words, but by risking their own resources, reputations, and relationships, I see saints.

And when you think about it, isn't this exactly what Jesus did? He came down from heaven as the greatest of saints, but as Paul put it, rather than, "*regard (his) equality with God as something to be exploited... (he) emptied himself, taking the form of a slave....*"

From this social location in the lowest of the underclasses, with other outcasts, Jesus preached a simple message – that all of us, from every tribe, language, people and nation, deserve to be loved, respected, and treated as equals. And for preaching the good news of love we just heard in Matthew's gospel, Jesus was murdered.

Jesus' sainthood meant facing into real life and not flinching. If someone was hungry he fed them; if they had leprosy, he touched and healed them; if they were in despair, he cried with them. He grabbed a meal whenever he could, went away to pray far less often than he would have liked, and slept whenever and wherever possible. And in the process, one person at a time, he changed the world forever.

And so can we. The poet Mary Oliver puts it like this:

"When it's over," Oliver says, *"I want to say: 'All my life I was a bride married to amazement.*

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.'

When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world."

So relax, dear ones, and be content with simply doing the next right thing. The evangelist John, who knew nothing if it wasn't that the nature of God is love, understood this same truth when he wrote in his epistle, "*Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when God is revealed, we will be like God, for we will see God as God (truly) is."*