

The Saint in You

Psalm 31:23-24; Ephesians 1:1-6, 15-17

November 1, 2020

Well, last evening was Halloween, and unlike previous years, my neighborhood was NOT filled with delightful ghosts and goblins going from house to house due to covid.

In the past, there was usually too much candy left over at our house, and somebody had to eat it! I learned my lesson, and made sure to buy plenty of snickers bars and reese's cups just in case there was some left over!

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Some people may think of Halloween as the Devil's night of mischief, but Halloween actually precedes a day with a rich religious tradition. The "Hallow" in Halloween comes from the word "hallowed," as in the expression in the Lord's prayer, "Hallowed be Thy Name." Halloween is the day before the traditional Christian All Saints' Day, which happens to be on Sunday this year. It also means "a hallow(ed) evening."

The tradition dates back to the 8th century. The Celts believed that the souls of the departed roamed the earth for one night in the fall. Since it was a time of harvest, the people would huddle together in front of fires, eating, and telling stories about departed loved ones.

Today, Christians everywhere take the opportunity to remember the saints – those known and unknown, who have preceded us in the faith, many of whom have now found happiness in God's eternal kingdom, including those who have been spiritually significant to you.

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John Wesley, the 18th century founder of Methodism, said that the Feast of All Saints was his favorite festival in the church year, and I admit, I have become quite fond of it as well. It is one time when that great cloud of witnesses that Hebrews speaks about is emphasized and brought to our attention.

On All Saints' Sunday, I feel touched by the great procession of saints who have graced our lives, including my mother and grandmother, and some of my teachers coming up through the grades, in addition to those saints who are more well known.

I am sure you have your list as well of saintly people in your life. Sometimes I think it may be more helpful to think of saints as an adjective rather than a noun. Who has acted in saintly ways in your life and upbringing?

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In Mexico, All Saints Day is a national holiday, and one of the most important days of the year – known as *The Day of the Dead* – but maybe it should be called *The Day of the Living*. The holiday focuses on family gatherings and friends who pray for and remember friends and family members who have died. Mexicans are comfortable navigating in the spiritual world of the dead. They often feel the spiritual presence of the deceased. They go to the cemetery and take picnic baskets, sharing a meal with their departed family members and communing with them.

You are invited to remember loved ones and friends who are spiritually significant to you -- Godly people in your life and in the church – maybe some of them are still alive. Others have gone on to dwell with God in heaven.

Listen as the Psalmist David writes about the saints:

Oh, love the LORD, all you His saints!
 For the LORD preserves the faithful,
 And fully repays the proud person.
²⁴ Be of good courage,
 And the Lord shall strengthen your heart,
 All you who hope in the LORD. Ps 31:23-34

In the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul writes to the “saints” in Ephesus who are faithful in Christ Jesus:

*15 “For this reason,” Paul writes, “ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,
 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.
 17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know God better.
 18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which God has called you, the riches of the glorious inheritance in the saints,
 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

“...the riches of the glorious inheritance in the saints . . .”

In the early church, the saints were thought of as all the faithful believers in Christ, and not just the select few who were elevated above all the rest. Just who are these saints, and how have they graced your life?

It includes the likes of St. Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Avila, who transformed the church in many ways.

It includes Saints Paul and Peter, Thomas and John, - and the rest who took the gospel of Christ seriously.

The Feast of All Saints' may call to mind some of the "patron saints" of old:

- Jolly old Saint Nicholas was based on a historical personage—Saint Nicolas of Myra
- St. Anthony, allegedly helped find things-and people-who were lost
- Saint Christopher, kept us safe on trips
- St. Jude, patron of lost causes
- St. Valentine, bearer of romance. We have even given him his own special day with Valentine's Day.
- And St. Joseph – I was reading recently that St. Joseph is a very popular figure these days – he is the patron saint for those who are unemployed and seeking a job. I can imagine his name gets invoked frequently during these difficult economic times.

The list for me would also include more personal "saints" close to home: such as a saintly grandmother who raised me and first took me to Sunday School. There was my great aunt, Ula Vance. She lived to be 102 . . . she read her bible every day and enjoyed clarity of mind and keen eyesight, even at the end of her life. Stories are told in Petersburg, WV about my Aunt Lou, as I called her. No one could ever remember her speaking a cross or angry word to anyone. She never harmed a mouse or even stepped on an ant if she could help it. She had a deep reverence for the sacredness of all of life. She lived a saintly life, and I wish as a child I had been more mindful of her many spiritual gifts.

We have been surrounded by saints our entire lives, and it continues today. Think about the Apostle's Creed that many churches recite. It includes the expression, "I believe in the communion of saints." Do we stop and think about what that means? It must have been important to the early church fathers and mothers who included it.

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I like the way poet Anne Sexton put it in her poem, The Saints Come Marching In. "The Saints come," she writes, "They come as human as a mouth,

*With a bag of God on their backs,
like a hunchback, they come,
they come marching in.
They come crowding together
like devout baseball fans at a game.
Their game is taking God seriously,
taking God's word to heart,
though often God seems mute."*

Anne Sexton, The Saints Come Marching In

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How about you? Who would be on your list of saints? Who has made an indelible impression on your life? Your very desire to seek God and know God's will includes you in the company of saints. Perhaps you are on somebody's list because *you* have graced their life in a saintly manner.

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God has put inside me and I suspect inside you a desire to explore the movement of God's spirit within. Sometimes I think the interior of our minds and hearts is the least examined area of our lives. Often it is like a frontier. For me the exploration often starts with a Word, a scripture or an idea, and trickles down into the deep, dark recesses of the soul where sometimes we don't allow God's light to shine.

We all have those dark areas if we're honest. What is it we are hiding from God, or trying to handle on our own when God is there, ready and eager to help? Lately I have valued the time while driving to be alone with God. I used to listen to the radio, but now I turn it off and spend time in quiet with God. The same is true when I walk. No more podcasts or NPR. God speaks loudly through nature without uttering a word.

But getting back to the saints, the word saint derives from the word *Sanctus* - which we translate as the word "holy." In this morning's reading from Ephesians, and in all of Paul's letters, the word - "sanctus" - or "saint" -- is applied indiscriminately to those who faithfully try to live according to the example set by Christ.

It is not reserved for the few iconic figures deemed worthy of sainthood by the Catholic Church. As a Christian, you are in the process of being "sanctified" on a daily basis, and that makes you one of God's saints!

But don't make the mistake of thinking that those who are in pursuit of saintly virtues are somehow "holier than thou" or pretend to be better than anyone else. Quite the opposite is true. The more you allow God's light to shine within you, the more you are likely to see your own flaws, your brokenness and separation from

God. It was certainly true for St. Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross, who suffered deeply with their own darkness and feeling that God was often absent.

That's why I suspect most people are reluctant to visit their vast interior landscape. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." So it's not about becoming more holy or cultivating more virtue, but recognizing the opening up of your own darkness so that God's light might shine.

In 1 John 1:5, we hear – "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in God there is no darkness at all." When God shines a light, it is in us as well. And so we may think of a saint as someone who allows God's light to shine in him or her, filling up his or her own darkness with light.

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The New Testament uses the word "Saint" fifty-seven times. The writers must have thought it was important. The Apostle Paul – also referred to as St. Paul – said in Philippians 3 – "*Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.*"

Paul allowed Christ to fill him up, and the less of you there is, the more of God there can be. Maybe that's what a saint is – someone who is completely filled up with God and not with him or herself.

In closing, I'm reminded of the prayer of St. Patrick, who allowed God to fill him up as well. He prayed:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, and in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

--Prayer of Saint Patrick

For St. Patrick, there was more of Christ and less of him. So let us join with the communion of saints, and in doing so, you too will be among them. AMEN

Psalm 31:23-24

Oh, love the Lord, all you His saints!

For the Lord preserves the faithful,

And fully repays the proud person.

²⁴ Be of good courage,

And He shall strengthen your heart,

All you who hope in the Lord.

Eph 1:1-7, 15-17

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

² Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Praise for Spiritual Blessings in Christ

³ Praise be to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For God chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in God's sight. In

love ⁵ God predestined us for adoption to through Jesus Christ, in accordance with God's pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of God's glorious grace, which has been freely given us in the one God loves.

¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him.