

Blessed Are You

A Sermon Preached by
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Psalm 149
Luke 6:20-31

Some of us, perhaps many of us, have had the great good fortune of being able to travel abroad, either with a travel group from church or on business or vacation. Every family, every travel group, every individual has something that is a “must see” on any trip. Many of us, like me for example, make a point of visiting churches and cathedrals in every city and town along the way. My children would tell you that traveling with my husband Derek and me, they always saw every church we could find, and all the grocery stores in between! Which may seem odd, but it’s a unique and effective way to get to know a place.

One city whose great churches and cathedrals are often visited by travelers is London, and I imagine that somewhere in your travels, you might have visited St. Martin-in-the-Fields, one of the oldest churches in London. Located on Trafalgar Square, in the heart of the city, the present structure was built in 1726, although there is evidence of its origins in the thirteenth century.

A unique feature of St. Martin-in-the-Fields is that the original burial crypt in the basement is now something called the Café in the Crypt, which on their website looks to be a warm and inviting – if not somewhat unlikely – spot for afternoon tea or a quick lunch. One restaurant reviewer noted that it had a certain “spooked and spicy charm.” Which may or may not be very appealing. Now what makes this even a little more interesting is to learn that centuries ago, when churches were left unlocked, and the neighbors had a much stronger sense of ownership of the building and grounds, the church had some trouble with people going into the church and burying people in the dirt floor of the basement.

A sign was eventually put up outside the church, which read, “By order of the Vestry, no one is to bring any more bodies into the basement of this church. The foundations of the church have been disrupted because of so many bodies. The stability of the building is being curiously

impaired. No one is to bring a body into this basement for burial without the express approval of the Vestry.”

On this day that we celebrate All Saints’ Sunday, that story gives new meaning to the idea of our resting on the shoulders of the departed saints. Not to mention the image of the foundations being shaken – or “curiously impaired” – by those same dear departed saints. We do, indeed, stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, and on this day we remember and honor all of them, perhaps especially those who have shaken the foundations of the church.

More than a few years ago now, I was on staff at our presbytery office, and one of the many wonderful opportunities I had was to work with an ecumenical group planning the All Saints’ Day community worship service. Prior to the year I arrived and ended up on the planning team, it had been an effort of the Catholic and Lutheran parishes in and around downtown Minneapolis. But for some reason, they decided to invite broader participation, and so I was there on behalf of the Presbyterians, along with someone from the United Church of Christ, the United Methodists and the Episcopalians.

At the first meeting, after we had all introduced ourselves, someone turned to me and said, “Do Presbyterians even celebrate All Saints’ Day?” Well, all right, I have to admit that for just a moment, I had to stop and think! It is not a holy day that we have always commemorated as Protestants, but it has enjoyed a renewal in recent years in many churches, as we have turned back to the New Testament understanding of the saints as referring to all Christians; those who have walked with God throughout the ages; and in particular churches, those who are examples of faith for us, the “communion of saints” that we hold in memory. So, without letting that embarrassing moment go on too long, I was able to recover and say that, yes, many of our churches celebrate All Saints’ Day. And most of them do so, just as we do this morning, by reading the names of those who have died in the last year, who were part of this community of faith, the ones on whose shoulders we stand.

On this day, we are invited to remember those who have gone before us, from the saints “who go marching in,” to those “who from their labors rest;” the famous as well as the anonymous who now rest with God beyond the realm of time and space. Peter Gomes, the minister of Harvard Memorial Chapel, has written, “Of all the Christian holidays, I find this one, in all of its senses to be the most reassuring.” He goes on, “I like the idea of the great and heroic ones who have gone on before; their names remind us that great lives were called to do great things for God. I like thinking of the saints

beyond, not simply resting, but waiting for us to join them; they assure us of a future. And I like thinking of saints as ordinary people like ourselves, seeking to be faithful and holy, here and now.”¹

We are also reminded of the importance of recognizing the saints among us. Not the kind of saints that are held up on special days, prayed to for lost objects, or revered in statuary and on icons – although I’m the first to admit some disappointment when St. Christopher fell out of favor. He was a very popular charm bracelet saint when I was in junior high school, and I was sorry to see him go; and with him, much of my jewelry collection. And not even those that we probably all count in our litany of saints, historic and heroic figures from Martin Luther to Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa to Mary Jo Copeland, those who somehow inspire us to greater depths of faithfulness. No, I’m talking about the “everyday saints,” those folks who come in and out of our lives when we most need them, and least expect them; the ones who roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty; those who willingly, and often cheerfully, take up that work that nobody else particularly wants to do. One writer has said, “everyday saints (are those) who exist neither in stained glass nor in heaven but in the rough-and-tumble of our daily lives.”²

These are the saints who take seriously the commandment to love one’s neighbor, but who also take seriously the words that are spoken by Jesus in this morning’s Gospel lesson from Luke, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you . . . Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Or in Peter Gomes’ words, these are the everyday saints who are “faithful and holy, here and now.”

It’s not an easy task, this being “faithful and holy, here and now,” especially when we hear, “Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry now, blessed are you who weep now, blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you.” It doesn’t sound like much of a blessing. But when you stop to think about it, there’s really no better prescription for sainthood than truly and genuinely loving one’s neighbor, even if the neighbor turns out to be the enemy. Most of the people I would name as the everyday saints in my life have that much figured out.

There is no better time in the life of a congregation to remember and honor our saints than during a period of transition. We’re about to begin an

¹ Peter Gomes, “All sinners, all saints,” *Christian Century*, October 22, 1997, p.941.

² Ibid.

exciting journey that may at times feel like we're wandering in the wilderness, just as our ancestors in the faith did. It may at times produce anxiety and impatience and a deep desire to keep things just the way they are, to get out of this period of uncertainty and go back to Egypt, where everything was familiar. But there is manna on the ground and, believe me, we won't walk into the wilderness unless I know the way through to the other side. And we will count on the stories of all the saints of this congregation to keep us focused on what's ahead when the going gets a little rough. You know who they are – and I hope to learn more about your history and heritage, to learn more about the saints who have inspired and encouraged this congregation.

We're also looking ahead to Stewardship Sunday next week, a time when we will bring our gifts, our pledges of financial support and our hopes for the future. That's also a good time to remember and think about all of those who have gone before us, to honor their gifts and their hopes, to remember whose shoulders we're standing on as Oak Grove moves into the future that God has for us.

Writer and Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechner reminds us that, "On All Saints' Day, it is not just the saints of the church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken ones and whole ones, the despots and tosspots and crackpots of our lives who, one way or another, have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints, and whom we loved without knowing we loved them and by whom we were helped to whatever little we may have, or ever hope to have, or some kind of seedy sainthood of our own."³

So as they go marching in, we name them and remember them. They are those everyday saints, the faithful and holy, here and now, who have taught us and encouraged us and loved us into being more than we thought we could be. Think about the saints in your life: the teacher who said, "You can do better," and the one who said, "You have an amazing talent." The coach who let us on the team when we were just a little lacking in the necessary skills, because he thought we could improve with experience; and the one who kept us off the team because we weren't ready for that level of competition. The aunt who gave us piano lessons and then gave us her piano. The mother who always said we were the best thing that ever happened to her, and the father who agreed, but couldn't put it into words, so he took us to the ballgame instead.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, Harper San Francisco: 1992, p. 290.

They are those who stood by us and stood beside us; who stood behind us and stood for us when we couldn't stand at all. The older sister who faced down the fifth grade bully, and who continues to take on the bullies of the world; the co-worker who joined you in filing a complaint; the friend who went with you to the juvenile detention center when that child was picked up for possession, and who let you cry all the way home.

They are those everyday saints who speak the truth and help us hear it. The nurse who said, "Your mother is dying," and the hospital chaplain who gathered you all in prayer around her bed. The doctor who said, "The news isn't good," and, in the same breath, "but we're a long way from the end of the road."

They are the friends who hold us up and occasionally hold us back. The one who brought a casserole over when the dog died and always remembers your birthday with flowers. And the one who reminded you that you were once sixteen years old, and grounding her for the rest of her life wasn't going to help your mother-daughter relationship.

They walk with us through the darkest valleys and talk us through the dark nights of our souls, when we can't find God anywhere. They pray for us and they pray with us. They hold our secrets and they hold our hands. They laugh with us until we can't catch our breath, and share our happiness without envy or resentment. They are faithful and holy, here and now.

And so we tell their stories, foolish and wise, shy and overbearing, broken and whole, all part of who we are. We write them on our hearts, we recite them to our children, so that the mind and memory of the community remains unbroken from generation to generation. We remember those whose names we will read, and those who are named only in our hearts. On this All Saints' Day, when we remember and give thanks, it is for all of those saints. Thanks be to God. Amen.