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## *Who are the Saints of God?*

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Today is one of the great feasts of the church, a day where we come to celebrate all the saints. The writer of Hebrews calls them "the great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1).

Who are these saints? Are they different than us? Does God impute or infuse them with something that God withholds from us? Yes, the saints are holy, but the fact of the matter is that "the saints of God are just folk like [you] and me" (Hymn, 293).

One of the more formable moments in my understanding of the saints came when I was a chaplain at All Saints' Chapel in Sewanee, TN. Ironically, this epiphany didn't occur in All Saints' Chapel, but down the street at The School of Theology, where I was taking a Greek Course. The Greek professor happened to be an old wise Lutheran Pastor. There was an urban legend that Greek might have been the common language when he was born! The professor was advanced in age, but had the wisdom of a saint!

It never failed that as we were translating a passage of scripture, our professor would get so caught up in the text that he would just start preaching. These diatribes were rich in theology and wisdom, and thanks be to God they were in English and not Greek.

On this All Saints Sunday, I am reminded of one of his stories. I believe we were translating the opening lines of Paul's letter to the Philippians. In case you can't recall that text from memory, here is what Paul writes: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi" (Philippians 1:1). When we got to the phrase "to all the saints," our professor began to share a childhood story about going to church with his grandfather.

His Lutheran grandfather didn't believe the saints were super-humans, so he took every opportunity to tell his grandson that the saints of God are just folks like us. My professor said this made an impact on him as a young child, but he never forgot the manner in which his grandfather professed this conviction. When his grandfather recited the Apostles Creed and got to the line: "The communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins," he would swap things around and shout out: "the communion of sinners and the forgiveness of the saints." It made an impact on his grandson.

(Today is a baptismal Sunday, which means we will recite a version of the Apostle's Creed instead of the Nicene Creed. Please recite it as it is written. I really want to keep my job!)

In all seriousness, my professor's story has a way of reminding us *the saints of God are just folks like us*.

A brief survey of church history reveals that the great saints were people just like us. I think of someone like Clare of Assisi, born into a well-to-do Italian family. Like many in this room, she was a defiant and rebellious teenager. At 18 years old she snuck out of the house and became a saint by giving up her lifestyle and founding a woman's order that would serve the poor.

I think of someone like St. Augustine of Hippo, who might have easily been stereotyped as a party boy. We should

probably call him the patron saint of fraternities and sororities. In his *Confessions*, Augustine talks about his struggles becoming holy because he was so attached to his sins and party lifestyle. His struggle was made evident in one of his most quoted prayers: "O God, give me chastity and continence, but not yet" (*Confessions* 8.7.17).

St. Augustine of Hippo, the party boy, opened himself to God, was transformed by the Holy Spirit and became one of the greatest pastors and theologians in the history of Christendom. *The saints of God are just folks like us.*

There is another group of saints we celebrate today. They are the saints of our lives, whose names remain unknown to most of the world. The church has not officially beatified these saints; however, they have brought beatification and blessing to your life. The only icons that exist of these saints are the pictures that hang on your walls and sit on your shelves. They are the mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, spouses and friends, teachers and coaches, grandparents and godparents who are no longer with us today. Now they rest upon a greater shore and in a greater light, but when they were alive they filled your life with grace and love.

Who are these saints? Can you name them? You know these saints, because you think about them all the time. The memory of them warms your heart and fills your eyes with tears. Perfect, they were not, but holy they were; holy because they exemplified God's grace and love in your life. They, too, are a part of this great cloud of witnesses.

One of the great things about being an Episcopalian is that every time we gather at this altar "we join our voices with Angels, Archangels and all the company of heaven" (BCP, 361). We join our voices with all the saints""the saints of our lives and the saints of the church.

Which brings me to my final point: We need to pay attention to those voices!

What are those loved ones, the saints of our lives, saying to us today? I bet their voices are saying something to us about the power of love""The love they have for us, the importance of pursuing love in our lives, and the glory of what it will be like to dwell in God's love. That is their message to us.

What about the saints of the church? What are their voices saying to us on this All Saints' Sunday? What are their voices saying to us the Sunday before a major election?

As I read and studied the saints this week, I kept hearing them echo the words of scripture""Do Not Be Afraid" (Matthew 28:5). Politicians campaign on fear. Whatever the situation, whatever the circumstance "do not be afraid;" Jesus says "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

The saints of the church did not fear but had a deep and abiding faith in God. Their faith in God enabled them to give, live and love in a way that brought joy and excitement to their lives, and it also enabled them to be a holy blessing to the lives of those around them. They put their trust in the voice of the Good Shepherd because they knew he had power to bring life to a man that was as good as dead (John 11: 39-44).

The saints of God believed in the power of Christ and lived in such a way that "even at the grave they made their song Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia" (BCP, 483). There is nothing else to say but Alleluia, because Alleluia has been the song of the saints (in their living and dying) since the empty tomb of Easter.

Today, as we baptize new Christians, as we offer pledges on this commitment Sunday, let us join our hearts and voices with all the saints. The saints of God are just folks like us, so let their song become our song; let us SING A NEW SONG to the Lord""Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!