

All Saints Sunday + November 6, 2011

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. Saint is a funny word. What comes to your mind when you hear the word “saint?” I suspect that it carries many connotations, not the least of which is a sense that saints are somehow perfect or a cut above everyone else. Indeed, there are certain days of the year set aside to remember saints who have shaped and influenced believers. There are folks from the Bible with special days: St. John, St. Mary, St. Peter and St. Paul. Then there are the generations of believers that followed – Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, and Mother Theresa. These are folks who have made a difference but these people were not a “cut above” everyone but set apart to walk alongside everyone.

That’s a saint. Someone set apart for a particular purpose: to spread the love of God to all the world. Today we celebrate all saints and the focus is on the world “All.” That includes you and me, real people with real flaws, but set apart nonetheless. All who bear the name of Jesus are set apart to love others with the very same love of God that we know and cherish and depend upon.

In a way this day is kind of like a Christian Memorial Day because we pay particular attention to those who saints have gone before us. We remember, today, those who have died. We give thanks for them and all they gave us and all the ways they shaped our lives. So, I invite you today to picture them in your mind’s eye. Imagine that person of those people who touched you, influenced you, had an impact on your life – how you think and behave. When you picture them what do you see? How did they touch your life? In what ways did they share God’s love with you? What was their contribution in shaping the way you live right now? As you think of those who have died or those sitting next to you this morning, how would you describe them? How would you describe the saints you have known?

I like to describe saints this way: saints are people who sing. Saints have taught me to sing! Each of them sang or sings in a unique way. No two tunes are alike, but the common thread that runs through their singing is that they sing to God. And those near and dear to me who have died: their songs were songs of praise. Their songs were hymns to God. Their singing was all about worship – singing to God in good times and in bad times, in joy and in sorrow, in times fear and confidence, in both safety and danger. In all seasons of life and faith, they sang to God who has done and continues to do marvelous things.

If we think about it, this has been the vocation of God’s people for a very long time. When God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, making a path of dry land for them to escape and drowning the oppressor, what did Moses and the people of Israel do? They sang. They sang a song of triumph and freedom to the God who had saved them. God did a marvelous thing. And Miriam, with tambourine in hand began to dance and all the women danced with her because God had triumphed. God did a marvelous thing.

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary, the mother of Jesus signs praise to God because this God has done marvelous things and acted on behalf of God’s people. She sings praise of a God who has turned the world upside down by exalting the lowly ones and the poor and scattering the rich and the proud.

Each Sunday we sign Psalms which are songs of praise to God straight from the Bible. Some are all out hymns of praise: “Praise God with trumpet sounds, timbrel and dance” Many invite all of

creation to join in our singing. Even those psalms which are not so exuberant are filled with song. In Psalm 42 the ones who are cast down and disquieted still end up in the realm of hope. I shall again praise him because this God is faithful and is a God of promise and acts in love to save and forgive and make us whole. This God does marvelous things.

The saints I've known and have touched my life have continued this biblical singing and by singing to God they have handed to me the gift of faith. You see, I did not choose Jesus. It wasn't my idea. I did not decide one day to begin worshipping God. This faith was handed down to me by the saints who went before me. They shaped my life by teaching me how to worship. Now, that doesn't mean they all sang in the choir. It doesn't mean, either that they all necessarily sang loud or boisterously. In fact, a few of them didn't literally sing at all. Some felt they could not carry a tune in a bucket. In fact, I have in my mind's eye a particular person who always went to church but remained silent during the songs. What I meant is this: these saints centered their lives in worship; the common thread was that they prayed. They delighted in giving thanks to God and in doing so they taught where to go in times of plenty and in times of want, in times of sorrow and times of joy, in all times: to God who had done and continues to do marvelous things.

I think the saints teach us how to sing.

At the conclusion of this sermon, I will be naming those saints from Bethlehem who have died this past year. Their names are pictures are also inscribed in the "Book of Life" normally kept in the Columbarium but today and throughout the rest of this month will be on display near the font. As each name is read, a candle will be lit on the Altar Table. In addition, you are invited to remember loved ones from who died this year or many years ago, any or all saints, to give thanks for their lives and witness. And as we name these BLC folks and as you light candles for the special saints in your lives, I wonder how they taught you to sing? How did they enlarge your trust in God? How did they help you cling to hope? How was their worship of God a witness to you and how did that enable you to live as a faithful follower of Jesus? In what way did they help you sing?

As we remember them, we will, no doubt grieve their loss. We feel the sting of that loss whether they died last year or several years ago. That grief is real and we are free to feel the loss and lament to God and each other. Whatever it is we might be feeling today - ... this is the hope before us: articulated in today's first lesson where we have this vision of all the saints from all places and nations, a vast multitude that no one can even begin to count. They are surrounding the lamb at the center of the throne of God, waving palm branches and what are they doing? They are singing. We are told that this is their full time job. They sing day and night: Blessing and glory and wisdom and power and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God!

And it is not incidental that they sing together. That's what we do as God's people. We sing together. When God delivered Israel from their slavery they sang together. When Mary sang her praise to God she could not help but run to her cousin Elizabeth to share the good news. She could not keep that song to herself. And Jesus and the disciples, after the Last Supper, before they went to the Mount of Olives in that rather somber situation we are told that they sang a song together. Just after Pentecost, in the book of Acts we are told that the earliest believers met together to sign and worship in the temple.

And here in the beautiful vision from Revelation what are the saints doing, they are doing what they have done all along. They sing. They are still singing!

We are signing with them. We are singing with them!

Every Sunday when we pray the great prayer of thanksgiving at this Table and when we do so we join our song to their song. You know the words of the preface before we sing that song “Holy, holy, holy Lord.” This is what we pray: “And so with your church on earth and the host of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn...”

We join their unending hymn ... that full time work in heaven where singing never ceases, where songs of praise and worship are sung to God day and night. When we gather here we join our singing to that singing. Our praise is joined to the praised of all the saints – those we see and those we cannot see. We join our songs to their songs. We are singing with them.

I like to think that we really do not come to church to worship on our own initiative. Christ bids us to come. Christ invites us and beckons us to come. Christ calls a gathering of believers together and Christ, the primary actor in this drama is present to speak to us, to feed us, to send us forth into the world. And Jesus Christ is surrounded by a most amazing welcoming committee. Tons of folks. A great multitude of saints. They are surrounding the throne and they beckon us to come. They are gesturing toward us to come and sing and worship. I imagine this every Sunday, the saints who are hanging out in the rafters and filling the pews and the aisles are saying – come to the party ... Come and join us in our singing.

Those whom we name today. Those whom we remember and for whose witness we give thanks are here among us. They sing full time and we join our song to theirs. They surround us. They beckon us. They encourage us. They cheer us on. Most importantly they direct to the Lamb who is at the center of the throne and is alone worthy of our praise and thanksgiving. Amen.