

All Saints, Year B – We Can All Be Saints

John 11:32-44

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The three days that include Halloween, today's All Saints' Day, and tomorrow's Commemoration of All Faithful Departed, what used to be known as All Souls' Day, probably require a bit of explanation. I know that until I got to seminary it was pretty confusing to me!

First of all it is worth recalling that St. Paul frequently referred to saints, by which he did not mean those special, special people who are always referred to as St. Thomas, or St. Joseph, or St. Theresa, or St. Augustine – remembering that even those names are only part of the story, since there are a number of saints that share their first names, but are, in fact, different people. We have an example, of course, in the naming of our own church. Roman Catholics have, at last count, something over 60 saints named John. No, Paul was not referring to those saints, but to all believing members of Christian communities. The word "saint" is simply the English version of the Latin word "sanctus," which means holy. And *sanctus* is merely the word that translates the Greek word for holy, *hagios*, into the Latin of the Latin Bible that served the western world for centuries as its source of scripture. So, following that logic, it would seem that All Saints' Day should suffice and that there would be no need for All Souls' Day as well. Oh well! Would that religious matters were as easy as all that!

What happened was that in what has come to be called late antiquity, the time of transition from the classical era to what we now call the middle ages, the very special people of the first centuries of Christianity, the martyrs and other church fathers, came to be so admired that they became the foundation of what is sometimes referred to as the cult of the saints. People decided that they had to have relics of the time on earth of these special people because it was commonly believed that those relics had special healing powers. This was not a concerted effort on the part of the church to cultivate lists of saints. It was popular piety of a most devoted and developed sort.

The results of the efforts to acquire these relics became sometimes humorous, if not scandalous. It has been said that if some of these relics, such as the fingers of saints, were truly real, the saint in question would have had to have had a hundred fingers or so. But the verifiability of the relics wasn't the point. The belief in their efficacy and the devotion that attached to them was.

Furthermore, each church came to commemorate local saints on their calendars, those early Christians who had achieved marvelous things in their particular areas. One might well think of saints like Patrick, who was reputed not only to have converted many, but to have driven all snakes from Ireland as well. As time passed, more figures with colorful and admirable stories came along; so the lists, which had gotten quite out of control, came to be consolidated so that the most admirable might be celebrated by Christians everywhere, rather than in just their own particular locales.

Thus the church saw the development of long lists of these very special saints, and mechanisms likewise became essential to determine which were worthy enough to be called

saints in this new sense of the word – including the requirement that the person proposed for sainthood, after death be responsible for at least two miraculous cures attested to by a specially appointed investigator. And, of course, we also came to have individual saints associated with particular professions and places – thus the notion of patron saints. No matter that some of the saints, like St. Michael, were Angels, not humans, or that some, like Christopher or Barbara, probably never even existed. Popular piety is far more potent than logic in such matters. So November 1st became the day to commemorate *all* these very *special* saints, the ones that churches were named for, that generated cures, and whose relics people – and churches – just had to acquire. In fact, another tradition required a church to acquire a relic of the saint for whom it was named and to put it into a little niche just under the surface of its altar table.

So, if All Saints' Day has become the time to commemorate those special people who, at least in the Catholic Church, would be known as Saint So and So, what then is All Souls' Day? One of the phrases in our prayer book that speaks most eloquently to me is in both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, one of which we recite every Sunday. They set forth those things that as Christians we agree that we believe, and one of those things is something that we refer to as the "Communion of Saints." That phrase does not refer to a sort of convocation in Heaven of all those very special Christians that have managed to be recognized by the Vatican as saint material. It refers instead to all those faithful Christians from the earliest days of the religion to this very day – both living and dead – who make up the body of Christ. We are part of this lineage. After we're gone we shall *continue* to be part of it. To me, that assurance is, frankly, a very great comfort.

Actually, it has sort of taken me by surprise to find that this is so, since one of those characteristics of which I was most proud through most of my life has been my determination to be my *own* person. Perhaps because I was an only child in a very small town, where everyone knew everyone else – and what they were doing – I grew up very wary of revealing very much of myself, and certainly of permitting all those other people in my life to tell me how I was to live it. Actually, as I think of it, I think that one of the main reasons for my moving to California was to be truly on my own. So what is it now that gives me comfort about the notion of being just one in that long line of Christians? It is, I'm increasingly certain as I grow older, that just as our Christian understanding of God is that He is internally Trinitarian and therefore social, we are also, in our very essence, social beings.

So I guess I'd have to say that I feel a kind of mystical solidarity with the long line of faithful Christians who comprise the body of Christ. We are *all* people of God, those who came before us through the many centuries of the Church, those who are alive today, and those yet to be born. Today's Gospel, about three friends of Jesus: Martha, Mary, and, of course, Lazarus, is notable because it reassures us of two very important things. First, Jesus, the very Son of God, is capable of feeling our pain, as he begins to weep when he sees the pain that Mary and the others are experiencing. There are various theories of why exactly Jesus weeps, but my own is that it is for the pain that he himself has precipitated by delaying his trip to Bethany to respond to the sisters' entreaties so that, as he put it, "the Son of God may be glorified through it." In other words, he waited for Lazarus to die *so that* he could raise him. And that delay was painful for Lazarus's sisters. But we see here that he, and therefore God, can assuredly feel our pain, for he felt theirs. Secondly, by raising Lazarus, Jesus demonstrates that he is indeed, as he earlier told Martha, "the resurrection and the life." Lazarus will die again, just like all of us – just, indeed, as Jesus himself did. But just as Jesus

was raised, Lazarus and we shall be also. Just as *all* the saints, the faithful departed, will be raised— because we shall *be* part of that communion. In the meantime, though, while we are still here, as we must come more and more to understand by reading the New Testament, life is *not* about us, but about what we can do for others as we follow Christ and show ourselves worthy to be in the company of the Communion of Saints. Indeed, all those saints make good company to be in. So let us all, in the words of the wonderful hymn, “I sing a song of the saints of God,” that ends the 10 o’clock service this morning, sing out with vigor that we “mean to be one too.”

AMEN