

All Saints Sunday, Yr A (2011)
Revelation 7:9-17
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

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In the name of the one, holy and living God. Amen.

“It’s dying makes a death,
and living makes life.”

Those words jumped off the page as I was reading Barbara Kingsolver’s most recent book, *The Lacuna*.

“It’s dying make a death,
and living makes life.”

It seems to me that’s what we’re here to celebrate this day:

Death
and
Life....

That is to say, the lives of those who have gone before.

Today we celebrate the lives of the Saints – those people who may not be related to us by blood but who are nevertheless our Brothers and Sisters in the Body of Christ.

I would wager that when we think of “saints” most of us think of those famous folk like Saint Francis, who renounced a life of wealth and power as the son of a prominent rug merchant in Assisi to live and serve God among the poor.

Or perhaps we think of John the Baptist, walking through the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey and preaching repentance to all who would hear.

And we all know his head ended up on a silver platter – literally!

Then there are some lesser-known saints acknowledged by the Church who were just as possessed by the Spirit of God, performing remarkable deeds in their own day.

Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky was gifted with a facility for languages.

During his lifetime he translated the Bible and parts of the Book of Common Prayer into Mandarin.

Schereschewsky was consecrated Bishop of Shanghai and began his translation of the Bible into Wenli when he was stricken with paralysis. He completed his translation of the Bible, typing some 2,000 pages with only the middle finger of his crippled hand.

It took him 20 years to finish his translation,
but finish it he did!

And then there is Catherine Benincasa – known as Catherine of Siena – the daughter of a wealthy family. When she was six years old, she was walking home along a road and stopped and looked upward. She had a vision of her Lord seated in glory with St. Peter, St. Paul and St. John; Jesus smiled on her and blessed her.

She then spent the rest of her life in prayer and meditation,
taking on the work of a nurse to care for persons with leprosy and cancer.

She worked during a time of severe plague -
visiting those in prison,
arbitrating feuds
and preparing troubled sinners for confession.

At age 33 she died,
exhausted
and paralyzed.

These are all our brothers and sisters in Christ whose lives we celebrate today.

But, for most of us,
if not all of us,
these are the unreachable –
those folks whose lives seem so far from ours that they remain at a distance.

I sent someone an email about the All Saints' Day service, and in the subject line I accidentally typed "All Aint's Day."

I would guess that's how most of us feel: "I *ain't* a saint!"

However, most of these folks who have been given official "saint" status by the Church were just ordinary folks like you and me.

They never would have proclaimed themselves to be saints.

Legend has it that St. Francis rolled naked in the snow to distract him from his lusty thoughts.

Saint Mary of Egypt was a prostitute for 17 years before she became a Desert Mother for the next 50.

Constance and her Companions – the Sisters of St. Mary – arrived in Memphis, TN in 1873 to start a girls' school.

Five years after their arrival Yellow Fever swept through the city. Over half the city fled, but Constance and the other Sisters stopped their teaching to tend to the needs of the sick. They all contracted Yellow Fever and died.

Constance and her companions did not set out to be martyrs.
They simply responded to the needs of the sick around them.

In the letter to the Church at Ephesus,
the writer celebrates the ongoing,
world-changing,
redemptive action of God
through the lives of the hearers.

Let us listen to these words as if spoken to us:

“In [Christ] you also...were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit....

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints....

“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, so that, *with the eyes of your heart enlightened*, you may know what is the *hope* to which he has called you...and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.”

You see --

God's future,
even now,
rushes forward to meet us –

reclaiming and realigning every present joy or sorrow,
failure or achievement,
within God's glorious intent.

God's holy reign is already at work in us!

And we are sent to be ordinary saints in the world -
agents of God's healing mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation in a broken world.

Hear the story of a modern-day saint who lives in Memphis:

“Martha Lee Thomas lives in a rickety cottage along a ramshackle row in downtown Memphis.

“The 70-year-old cleaned houses for decades.

“Now she uses the grocery cart parked in her sloping living room to collect cans for money. It helps her make it through the month after her Social Security check is gone.

“Thomas sounds like a good candidate for the Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association’s Meals on Wheels program.

“But instead of getting a daily lunch plate brought to her, she delivers them to those who need it more.

“Thomas, who lives around the corner from MIFA’s headquarters, walked there and asked if they needed help.

“That was 25 years ago.

‘I serve God by helping out my fellow man,’ said Thomas.

“Illiterate and mostly alone, Thomas says she doesn’t really need a MIFA meal. She cooked a big pot of greens at home – she’ll eat those all week.

“The meals, she points out, are for people too sick or fragile to cook for themselves.”

It’s dying makes a death,
but living...LIVING makes life!

The Saints are not the unreachables –
the Saints are ordinary people who are open to the Spirit of God working in and through them.

The saints are the faithful who share their lives in Christ.

Today we remember the saints: those whose lives have gone before -
some famous, some not –
but all of whom are Godly people, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten.

In the words of Frederick Buechner:

“There’s nobody God can’t use as a means of grace,
including even ourselves.” (*Wishful Thinking* p. 102)

AMEN.