

## A PICTURE FOR ALL SAINTS' DAY

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*For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:17)*

Some of you have been listening to my sermons for five and a half years now, and you may be thinking that such endurance should qualify you for sainthood. I'm sorry to say that not even on All Saints' Day is sainthood a gift that I can give to you. But in all these years you may have noticed that I often do try to give you something early on in the sermon, and that something is a picture. I try to give you an illustration created out of words that will help you connect with the Gospel and allow a state of interplay between your life and the kingdom of God. And so it will be today: today I'm going to give you a picture, but the illustration you receive today isn't a word picture. Rather, it's an actual picture that you will find, or probably already have found, in your bulletins.

The title of the picture is "The Homecoming." The artist, as you can see, is Norman Rockwell, who created this painting for the cover of the Saturday Evening Post on May 26, 1945. Serious art critics are still only slowly warming to Norman Rockwell. The avant-garde, it seems, dislikes the idealism that Rockwell unfailingly painted into his scenes. Life isn't like that, the critics have charged. But Rockwell himself would have been the first to admit that his paintings weren't a literal snapshot of how life was. "I paint life as I would like it to be," he said. In a recent Vanity Fair article, David Kamp, father of two Grace Church choristers, writes that Rockwell was "*working on several levels – the real, the ideal, and the state of interplay between the two.*"

The same can be said for All Saints' Day. All Saints' Day is about the real, the ideal, and the state of interplay between the two. All Saints' Day is about earth, and heaven, and the state of interplay between the two. Rockwell's painting of a soldier returning home and receiving the exuberant welcome of his family illustrates nearly everything I would want to say about today. So let us proceed, using Norman Rockwell's "The Homecoming" as a window into the wonderful and sacred mystery called the Communion of Saints.

The first detail that I invite you to focus upon is this: the young man is a soldier. The young man is a soldier who fought against the evil regimes that menaced the globe during World War Two. The saints of God are also soldiers of a sort. The saints of God are those in every generation who fight against evil. In today's Scripture readings and hymns you will hear again and again the recognition that struggle and conflict are an ever-present reality in the lives of saints. *These are they who have come out of the great ordeal*, is one thing we heard in Revelation. Many lines from today's hymns echo the theme: *And one was a soldier, and one*

was a priest, and one was slain by a fierce wild beast (Hymn 293 vs.2). These are they who have contended ... wrestling on till life was ended ... these who well the fight sustained, triumph by the Lamb have gained (Hymn 286 vs. 3). Our opening hymn, 287, includes all these lines: *O may thy soldiers, faithful, true, and bold, fight as the saints who nobly fought of old. And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long... Thou wast their rock, their fortress and their might: thou, Lord, their Captain in the well fought fight.* The young man in Rockwell's painting is a soldier.

The saints of God are soldiers, fighting on the side of Christ against the forces of darkness and evil. Likewise, Paul the Apostle evoked the image of a soldier when he encouraged the Ephesians (6:11) to *"put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."* But wait, you say. Saint and soldier aren't two words that usually play well together. And didn't we just hear Matthew (5:9) proclaim, *"Blessed are the peacemakers?"* We did. Lest you fear this is all getting uncomfortably militaristic, listen to how St. Paul describes the armor of God: the belt of truth around your waist, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes for your feet that will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The armaments are largely, if not entirely, defensive in purpose to fight an interior battle being waged for your own soul. The wiles of the devil are anger, hatred, despair, cynicism, self-righteousness, willful ignorance. Be dressed to resist the spiritual forces of wickedness that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and are always seeking to establish a beachhead in you.

What does it mean to be dressed as a saint? Too often we subscribe to the cartoon versions of what the saints of God must be like: they wear long flowing robes and halos, they make you feel guilty, they aren't real. But the superficial notion of sainthood doesn't square with the New Testament definition. The Greek New Testament word that we translate as "saint" is the same as the word for "holy." *Hagios* is the word, and what it means is simply *set apart for God*. Anyone whose life was or is set apart for God can be a saint. As Matthew suggests, the way to be blessed – the way to be dressed for God's service – is to practice humility, gentleness, mercy, and peacemaking, among other things. According to the New Testament, any Christian looking to Jesus can be a saint. So how about you? Are you a soldier of Christ, seriously struggling against sin and evil? Notice that the young man is a soldier.

Notice also that the young man is a member of a family – a family of redheads, I might add. Saints don't necessarily have red hair, but saints are members of a family: a family otherwise known as the household of God, the Body of Christ, the church. As you look at the painting, do you see the stars in the windows of the houses? During World War Two, a star in the window meant that a family member had been called away to serve in the armed forces. Many miles and often many years would separate family members. Those left behind prayed and hoped, enduring an anxious time of not knowing the fate of their loved ones. They put stars in the windows to help them cope and to show their support for family members in the field. *Who are these like stars appearing* one of our hymns today asks? They are members of God's family, the Communion of Saints.

All Saints' Day is traditionally a day for Baptisms in the church. Why? Because through Baptism another member is added to the family of God, and marked as Christ's own forever. In Baptism, another star goes up on the windows of heaven, where those who have gone before us watch and wait for a happy homecoming. You see, the Communion of Saints is a fellowship that death cannot divide. Because death could not extinguish Jesus, death cannot extinguish those who belong to Jesus. So the Communion of Saints, including the names we read today, is hardly a list of the dead. It is a living, supportive, purposeful fellowship. We pray for them. They pray for us. We belong to Christ. They belong to Christ. We have that link with them always because we are all part of the church, which is the Body of Christ, the family of God. All Saints'

Day is a wonderful time to ask, how might we strengthen your connection with this family of God? Notice that the young man is a member of a family.

Finally, notice how the young soldier's family welcomes him home. The saints of God also receive such a welcome from the heavenly host. One of God's great promises that All Saints' Day helps us to remember is that we can anticipate a joyful reunion in heaven with those we love. Something about the painting that interests me is the house itself that they all inhabit. I challenge you to find any trace of ornamentation on it. It is absent of all material decor. It is an unadorned, inner-city row house, and yet it evokes my deepest yearnings for home and heaven. In this vision of heaven you will find no pearly gates, or streets paved with gold. But one can imagine that all the riches of God's kingdom are depicted in the scene, all at once. That which we can only hope to catch fleeting glimpses of in this life happens here all at once. Awaiting the young man is every type of human love: the love of parents, the love of adoring children, the love of siblings, the love of neighbors and friends, the love of a sweetheart waiting around the corner, even the love of a dog rushing toward him with a stick in its mouth. Everyone is present; no one is missing. For all of them it is a moment of intense joy, the fulfillment of their watching and waiting and praying and hoping. They receive back what they feared was lost. They experience the day they thought might never dawn.

In John's vision of heaven, recorded in Revelation, he writes that *the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (7:17)*. In Rockwell's painting it is the mother who occupies the center of the scene with a welcoming embrace wider than the door itself. Just look at her face! On her face is depicted all the joy that Jesus referred to time and again in his parables. It is the joy that a shepherd feels when he has found his lost sheep (Luke 15:5). It is the joy that a woman feels when she has found her lost coin (Luke 15:9). It is the joy of God in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10). It is the joy of a man who finds treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13:44), and the father who welcomes home the son he thought was lost (Luke 15:32). The mother with outstretched arms receives back what she feared was lost. Jesus said, *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*.

An older woman in a previous parish I served was named Helen. She was salty and faithful. She smoked too much, and although outwardly cheerful, I could always sense a sadness deep in her soul. One day she told me why. Years before she'd been the mother of a son who never thrived, and eventually died when he was only ten-years old. Helen lived in a house that backed up to the school playground, and for years after losing her son, on many nights as she hovered between sleeping and waking, she would hear the voice of her boy calling to her from outside, as he did in life. Earlier this year when I learned that Helen herself had died, I thought of Norman Rockwell's painting, *The Homecoming*. I imagined Helen standing in the soldier's place, beholding the wide open welcome of God, and bracing herself to receive back all she feared was lost, especially the little boy, bounding off the porch, racing to greet her. Jesus said, *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*.

Today I give you a picture, a picture for All Saints' Day, a picture that for me sits squarely between earth and heaven. As with all the pictures I give you, I hope you will take this one home with you and reflect upon it. Let it strengthen you to believe that the love we fleetingly glimpse on earth points to a greater fulfillment in heaven. Let it nurture in you the reasonable and holy hope that for God's faithful people, life is changed, not ended; and when our mortal bodies lie in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place, eternal in the heavens.

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The article by David Kamp is entitled, "Norman Rockwell's American Dream," and appears in the November 2009 edition of *Vanity Fair*.