

A WINDOW INTO ALL SAINTS' DAY

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Grace Church in New York
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Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and from where have they come?" (Revelation 7:13)



Today is my 17th All Saints' Day at Grace Church, which means I have spent lots of time sitting over there in the rector's chair. When I look straight ahead, one particular stained glass window in the south transept shines before my eyes. This past week, as I thought about today, I realized that the window can illustrate everything I would want to say from the pulpit – so much so that we've printed a picture of it on your bulletin covers. You may wonder: who are these like stars appearing? The figure on the left side is an early Christian martyr named Perpetua. Hers is quite a story. At the turn of the third century, Perpetua was a young mother who lived in Carthage and was preparing for Christian baptism. The Roman Emperor at the time was Septimus Severus – a name that sounds like it comes straight from the file of villainous villainy. Septimus Severus believed that Christianity was a threat to the empire, so he determined to suppress it. When Perpetua and other members of her household refused to offer incense and worship the divinity of the emperor, Severus had them arrested and imprisoned.

Perpetua's father, unable to fathom his daughter's allegiance to someone invisible to see, begged her to deny she was a Christian. On the day of the hearing he burst into the courtroom carrying her infant son, pleading with Perpetua on the infant's behalf. But renouncing Christ was something that she could not do, even though keeping faith with Jesus would cost her everything. So the judge sent Perpetua and her companions into the arena to face a leopard, a bear, and a raging bull while drunken, bloodthirsty crowds cheered. The lower left panel of the stained glass window depicts the scene, complete with God, in full flowing white beard, reaching down from a cloud to give Perpetua an encouraging pat on the head. As the beasts began to tear them to pieces Perpetua called out to the others, *"Stand fast in the faith and love one another. And do not let what we suffer be a stumbling block to you."*

Today is not only All Saints' Day. Here at Grace Church it is also Pledge Sunday. The overlap of these two days is a happy coincidence. The saints in light are those who gave of themselves in times gone by. The saints on earth are those who give of themselves today. So we ask all members and friends of Grace Church to do nothing short of keeping faith with Jesus and

pledging a financial gift for the year 2021. We've sent letters through every means known to us, placed brochures and pledge cards in the pews, and we'll observe a few moments of silence after the sermon for all of us to respond prayerfully, faithfully, generously.

"But wait," you say. "Don't think a simple pat on the head is going to send me into a perilous arena of vulnerability." It's tough enough already keeping the wolves at bay. The pandemic has devastated the economy. Places like New York City are struggling to recover. People are out of work and running through savings to stay in their homes and put food on their tables. Perhaps Pledge Sunday feels like one more menacing beast eyeing you and your companions. We all fear that life has become a closed arena, or a closed economic system, where one person's gain can only come at someone else's expense.

Some time ago, in a distant era now known as BC – that is, Before Corona – I was riding in the subway. A group of young street dancers with a boom box came on board, cranked up the music, and started to perform. Their act was actually quite an amazing acrobatic display of somersaults, pole dances, and mid-air flips. Never once did they brush another passenger. When they were finished they began going up and down the car asking for money. One of them proclaimed enthusiastically, "*Remember, the more you give, the more we'll have!*" That's the way it works in a closed system, isn't it? The more you give, the more someone else will have. The more you give the less you will have to do the things you want, even if all you want to do is stave off chaos. Perpetua gave her all, and chaos swooped in upon her. Make a pledge? Raise my pledge? The stained glass window is lovely, but I'd rather hold the hungry beasts at bay, thank you very much.

Why then do we ask everyone at Grace Church to make a financial pledge? Let me tell you what I believe about the pledges we make every year: it is a way for us to become like the saints. The saints of God expressed their loyalty to Jesus through deeds of love. So we all need a physical, tangible way to declare our love for God. Pledging gives us that way. Clearly, Perpetua declared her love for God with a fierce and unshakable devotion. What accounts for it? The only answer that makes sense is that she had already grasped how much God had first loved her. What the artist of the stained glass window meant to convey by God's reaching out of the clouds was not that Perpetua received a condescending divine pat on the head. "There, there," says God, as the ravenous beasts took everything she had. No, that's not it at all. The scene is meant to show that for Perpetua, nothing was more real than the steadying, life-giving hand of God that was upon her. Existence for her was anything but a closed system. God was always reaching in to bless and comfort.

During her imprisonment Perpetua kept a diary of her ordeal, and she tells of three vivid dreams that she understood to be gifts from God. In the first she dreamed of a ladder that reached to heaven. She climbed it and found there a tranquil garden. In the second she dreamed vividly of her beloved brother, who had died of a terrible childhood disease. But in the dream he was alive and drinking the water of life. In the third she dreamed of herself as a warrior, and she took this to mean that in the arena she would be contending not with earthly beasts, but with the Devil himself who came to steal and kill and destroy. Perpetua gave everything to God because she knew that God had first given everything to her, and still had uncounted blessings in store. She could never out-give God. The more she gave, the more she would have in God's kingdom.

So it is with the pledges we make. Whatever we choose to do should be in response to the deluge of God's first loving us. Every year the pledge envelopes that we use have two parts. The top portion is a form that asks you to list some of the particular blessings God has made known to you. This year I am less enamored with earthly treasures that come and go, and seem strangely belonging to a culture of excess that existed before corona. Instead I want to thank God for life

itself. I want to give thanks for the lives of the people on our All Saints' Day list. I want to be grateful for all the times when the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has reached in and reminded me that nothing can separate me from the love of God.

God's blessings are too numerous to count. From the rector's chair if I look to the right I



take in the view of another window, the great window in the south transept that is entitled, *Witness to the Incarnation*. The window was installed in 1882, and depicts Zacharias, Elizabeth, Joseph, and John the Baptist: four people who witnessed God's reaching in to this life and taking on flesh. Over the years of gazing at the window I've noticed a curious thing. Towards the bottom of the first and third panels from the left you will see what could only be the unmistakable golden arches of McDonald's, complete with red background. Over 300 billion served by the latest count. Do you enjoy a tasty Bic Mac? Would you like fries with your order? May I supersize your drink? Talk about abundance! The golden arches of McDonald's symbolize much in our culture, but surely plenteousness is one theme they evoke: endless burgers sliding down the shoot, uncounted French fries scooped into their little bags. God's blessings are a deluge such as that. Now thank we all our God for all the blessings of this life.

So that's the first part of the pledge envelope: all the blessings of this life. The second part asks you to write a number on it. The financial promise you make not only says "thank you, Lord, for all these blessings I've listed," it extends God's reach into the world. It gives Grace Church the resources to reach out in all the ways that we do: with the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed, with music and worship, with Christian education, with support for agencies of mercy, with pastoral care, with an open door and a steady presence in what has been a bewildering year. The pledge you make says that you care about all the people whom Grace Church will serve.

In the sacristy of Grace Church we still keep the silver patens, or Communion plates, that date almost to the founding of the parish back in 1808. Not only do we keep them, from time to time we use them. In fact today when you come to the chancel steps to receive Communion, it will be from these historic patens that Julia and Thomas will administer the bread. How many people over the 212 years of our history had been served the bread of life from these patens? 300-billion may be pushing it, but I'd venture to say that the number is more than we might imagine. With your pledge you are saying that you care about all those we seek to serve at Grace Church. We are hardly alone in the Eucharistic feast. We are one with those who have gone before and those who will come after us. We are not alone.

Neither is Perpetua alone in her window. She's in the left-hand panel. On right side is someone else: Martin of Tours, who lived about 150 years after Perpetua. Martin was a monk who became a reluctant bishop in France during the mid 4th century. As a bishop he established monasteries and churches, and worked for the welfare of the poor. He also annoyed his brother bishops by living a simple, not regal life, and by criticizing their overly harsh repression of heresy.

But the story for which Martin is best known occurred before he was a bishop or even a monk. First he was a soldier in the Roman army. One winter day as he was entering the city of Amiens upon his horse, he encountered a beggar freezing in the snow. The pitiful sight deeply moved Martin, but he had nothing to give. So he took off his own soldier's cloak, cut it in half, and gave one of the halves to the freezing man. This is the scene depicted in the lower right hand

corner of our stained glass window: Martin, sharing his cloak. But the story goes on. That night, Martin, who was not yet a Christian, dreamed he saw Jesus in all his heavenly glory surrounded by angels. There was Christ in majesty, wearing half of a soldier's cloak. The angels asked him, "Lord, why are you wearing a torn garment? And Jesus answered with a smile, "My friend Martin gave it to me."

Perpetua laid down her life for the Lord she loved and knew. Martin gave half his cloak to beggar, and behold: the beggar turned out to be Jesus. All this in one stained glass window. It is a window into the wonderful and sacred mystery of the Saints, who lived their lives trusting that they could never out-give God. The more they gave, the more they would have. So it is today that *we sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true. And one was a soldier, and one was a priest, and one was slain by a fierce wild beast: and there's not any reason – no, not the least, why I shouldn't be one too.*

Stand fast in the faith and love one another.

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Information on Perpetua and Martin is found in: Stars Appearing, by Sibyl Harton, 1953; Lesser Feasts and Fasts, 1991; Grace Church in New York, A Guide to the Windows and Other Memorials, by Edyth McKittrick, 1997.