

ALL SAINTS “FOR THE REST OF US”

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Grace Church in New York
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Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise. But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. (Ecclesiasticus 44:8-9)

Earlier this year I had the pleasure of reconnecting with a family friend from long ago. The man’s name is Jim, and he was a parishioner at the first church where my father was the rector all through the 1960s. I’ve always admired that decade of my father’s ministry. St. Thomas Church in Newark, NJ was small. Dad was the only full-time staff member. Newark was undergoing tumultuous changes. Devastating riots would break out in 1967. Yet the church kept chugging along, and today I wonder how Dad did it. Jim explained that people simply liked my father. Because of him they would drive back into the city to go to church, even after they’d moved away, even through the riots. My father had the reputation of being someone to whom you could not say no. I am envious. People say no to me on a daily basis. Sometimes they use two words to say it.

Jim described another factor in my father’s popularity. People liked him because compared to his predecessor, he was a saint. The rector before Dad was a man named Fred. Apparently, at one point Fred was having car trouble so he went to the local mechanic, and they agreed on a price for the repairs. When the work was done Fred deemed it to be inadequate and he drove away without paying the bill. The mechanic was livid, and the airing of grievances became his passion. He let everyone in the neighborhood know that the local Episcopal rector had stiffed him. “The rector of St. Thomas was not good for his word. Don’t go to church there.” Understandably, Fred did not remain as the rector of St. Thomas for long.

Strangely, my take away from the conversation with Jim had less to do with my father, and more to do with the resilience of a grudge – the persistence of a memory. Jim and I were talking about a vanished world. Newark is unrecognizable to what it was. St. Thomas Church is gone, as are, no doubt, the mechanic, his garage, and Fred himself. Yet the memory of Fred and his one little offense a long time ago grumbles on into the future.

Today is All Saints’ Sunday, a day on the Christian calendar when we celebrate the wonderful and sacred mystery we call the Communion of Saints. Who are the saints? The mere mention of the word brings to mind various otherworldly and pious people. They prayed without ceasing. They fought without fouling. They ran without stumbling. They looked to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of their faith. They were mystics and martyrs who gave of themselves freely, even unto death. Those who witnessed their lives were certain that the light of Christ shone in them and through them. Indeed, the memory of their righteous lives continues as earth rolls onward into light. So, as we heard in the reading from Ecclesiasticus, we *sing the praises of famous men* – and famous women, too, we might add – whose images shine through stained glass windows. These are the Saints with a capital “S.”

Strictly speaking, if we had wanted a truly proper celebration of All Saints’ Day we would have gathered here to sing their praises on November 1st. All Saints’ Day every year is November 1st, no matter what day of the week it occurs. Nevertheless, over the centuries the church recognized that the Communion of Saints must include a much larger company than we can either imagine or canonize. The writer of Hebrews (12:1) declares that *we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses*. And again from Ecclesiasticus, we heard the suggestion that among the saints

are others of whom *there is no memory; they have perished as though they never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. But these also were godly people, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten.*

Not forgotten by whom? Not forgotten by God. Not forgotten by us. Thus, as early as the 10th century the church began extending the celebration of All Saints' Day, and named November 2nd All Souls' Day, or All Faithful Departed. These are the saints with a small "s." We recognize that among the Communion of Saints could be those we have known in this life: mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, daughters and sons. Even though the world eventually forgets, God remembers all the faithful departed who contributed to the growing good of the world. Today we light candles in their honor, and in the faith that God does not forget them. It was ten years ago when we began the candle practice. In prior years, on All Saints' Sunday I would read aloud the long list of names. Then in late October of 2012 Hurricane Sandy hit, knocked out all the power, and we couldn't produce a list. So what we did instead was light the tapers as we do on Christmas and Easter Eves. We even carry the candles with us to the Communion rail as if to suggest that the effect of their being carries on through history. The light of Christ still shines in and through the souls of all the faithful departed.

So it seems to me that one criteria for sainthood is caught up in the word faithful. A second criteria would be departed. Sad to say, you and I don't fit either category. Oh, we have moments of faithfulness, but compared to the saints who shine in glory, most of the time we feebly struggle. They were patient and brave and true, while we have too many moments of impatience, cowardice, and falsehood. As for being departed, well, we're not dead yet. So here we sit on November 6th not fitting either category. Do you remember the TV sitcom, Seinfeld, specifically the episode that popularized the novel holiday Festivus? If I recall, Festivus was a December holiday for those who fit neither the Jewish Hanukkah nor the Christian Christmas categories. "Festivus for the rest of us," they would say. Likewise, today. It's neither November 1st nor November 2nd. So you can think of today, All Saints' Sunday, as "All Saints for the rest of us." Today is for the rest of us: still in our earthly pilgrimage, and still stumbling after Jesus in fits and starts. But by any stretch of the imagination could you call us saints?

Once upon a time a man died. It was well known in the community that he was a no-good, lying, cheating, smoking, drinking, cussing, philandering, thief who never once darkened the doorway of a church. The dead man's brother came to the rector and said, "I'll give you \$25,000 to do the funeral, but at some point in the service you must declare that my brother was a saint." The rector thought for a moment, then, remembering that the rectory needed a new roof, he agreed. We all have our price, I suppose. On the day of the funeral he began the homily, "Here lies a no-good, lying, cheating, smoking, drinking, cussing, philandering, thief who never once darkened the doorway of a church. But compared to his brother, he was a saint!"

It may be stretching it to call either one of those brothers a saint, but you would be glad to know that the New Testament definition is more generous than you might think. To be a saint with a small "s" you don't have to be dead, nor do you have to be perfect. In fact, the New Testament uses the word saint to describe any baptized Christian. The New Testament word for saint and holy is the same. *Hagios* is the word, and what it means is set apart for God. Anyone whose life was or is set apart for God is a saint. This is why today, "All Saints for the rest of us," is a perfect day for baptism. Today we add two more souls to the Body of Christ. We set apart for God two more saints in the making. Some think that baptism is like a vaccine against going to hell, and even the most persnickety theologians would have to admit that on some crude level it's true. But as we've all learned about vaccines, the immunity can wane and viruses can morph. Sin, the world, and the devil have a way of getting to us. We need booster shots, otherwise known in

the church as the Eucharist. We need continual refreshment so that Christ lives in us and we in him.

Life in Christ is not a one-and-done thing. You can't "set it and forget it," as the saying goes. The candle in your soul will require attention and care if it is to remain burning. But when we do seriously commit ourselves to the way of Jesus, all things are possible. Mind you now, it's not by our own merits. It's not through feats of strength, but by the power of God. I think of Fred, my father's predecessor in Newark. This week I did a little internet sleuthing and found his obituary. It turns out that he stayed at the next church he served for 32 years. They must have liked him. He was married to his wife for 54 years. He had seven children and 10 grandchildren. They must have loved him. My guess is that through thousands of unhistoric acts he contributed to the growing good of the world. Nobody is paying me to say it, but he was a saint. He was a person whose life was set apart for God.

Literary critics sometimes debate what is the all-time best closing line of a novel. Often high on the list is the final sentence of the sprawling Victorian novel, *Middlemarch*, by Mary Anne Evans, who wrote under the penname of George Eliot. The author tells the story of Dorothea, and finally after 600 pages concludes: *But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.* Even though Evans herself was a religious dissenter, hers is a beautiful description of a saintly life.

One day last summer Stacie and I had some time on our hands, so we decided to drive to Ossining, NY, to see a family plot in a cemetery where a number of my ancestors are buried. I'd only been there twice before in my life, both times many years ago. The oldest grave belongs to my great-great grandparents, whom I never knew. But nearby them is their daughter, Mary, my great-grandmother who lived into her 90s, long enough to hold me as a baby and recite, from memory, I'm told, *The Owl and the Pussycat*. Two times in her life Mary went through the agonizing ordeal of burying a daughter. One was an infant who lived only six days. The other was my father's mother, my grandmother, who died from cancer two years before I was born. When Mary finally died she was buried near these two daughters. My grandmother is next to my grandfather. It was my grandparents who decided one day in the 1940s, when my father and his brothers were growing up, that the Waring family would be going to church every Sunday without exception. They laid down the law and made it stick. My father traced his call to the priesthood to their decision, and it's safe to say that my standing in this pulpit today is the result of it as well.

It tell you this not because it's a remarkable family story. If anything it's completely unremarkable. They lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in largely unvisited tombs. But any growing good in my life is partly due to their unhistoric acts. That things are not so ill with me as they might have been is thanks to them. Their light still shines. Their righteous deeds ripple through history.

So let us now sing the praises of famous men – and famous women too. Let us sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true, who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew. For the saints of God are just folk like me, and I meant to be one, too.