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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
All Saints' (transferred)
November 6, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Ephesians 1:11-23

The Feast of All Saints, as celebrated in many Episcopal parishes, is typically a general commemoration of all the faithful departed, past and present. Because there is no technical distinction (apart from what we might find in books such as Lesser Feasts and Fasts) between the canonized saints of old like Peter and Paul and the "everyday" saints like our departed friends and family members, we acknowledge that everyone who died in the faith joins the church in heaven regardless of how ordinary or extraordinary their lives on earth were.

However, the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church gives us the option of celebrating the canonized saints and the everyday departed Christians separately -- with All Saints on November 1st and All Souls on November 2nd. Were we to adhere strictly to this distinction, we would commemorate on All Saints those who have truly and indubitably "arrived" -- the apostles, the martyrs, the heroes of the faith, and other exceptional folks. Then, on All Souls, we would commemorate the faithful departed whose lives were no less significant but, for any number of reasons, didn't attract as much attention as, say, a Peter or Paul. Today, we (effectively) combine All Saints and All Souls into a single celebration and hold it on the Sunday closest to both days.

Around the time of the Reformation, in the sixteenth century, All Souls Day came under the scrutiny of the Reformers for its close association with purgatory and masses for the dead. Priests back then devoted an awful lot of time to saying masses for the departed souls in purgatory (and not just on All Souls

Day), but would gladly do so when surviving family members gave them money to say a mass on behalf of their departed loved one.

In case you're wondering, we reject the doctrine of purgatory, and, as evidence of this, I would direct your attention to Article XXII of the Thirty-Nine Articles, which can be found on page 872 of the Prayer Book. In that spirit, I am therefore uncomfortable saying masses for dead people. Why would that even be necessary in light of Article XXII? Saying masses with the faithful departed, however, is perfectly acceptable.

So how do we, as Episcopalians, understand sainthood? We might think of it being considerably less formal than it is in the Catholic Church. Catholics have canonization, which is a very rigorous process of elevating someone to sainthood. If one is to be made a saint, there must be documented evidence of one's exceptional life of service to God, which includes a requirement of at least two miracles. However, reforms to the canonization process made under Pope John Paul II have speeded things up considerably. Now, the process can start shortly after a person's death, whereas in the past it usually took years -- if not decades -- before one's name could be taken into consideration.

The Episcopal Church -- as well as the Anglican Communion as a whole -- doesn't have anything remotely as structured or rigorous. It's a bit more likely for us, in practice at least, to (as mentioned earlier) combine the celebrations of All Saints and All Souls and include the everyday saint on the same list alongside the extraordinary one. Thought of this way, sainthood is well within the reach of the average person (albeit minus a formal process of canonization), and, correspondingly, the superhuman qualities of those in the accepted canon

of saints have been downplayed.

Episcopalians tend to be more nebulous on the matter of "praying to saints" or invoking saints for some sort of assistance. Professionally, I, as a priest, neither promote nor prohibit the practice, and, were I to survey my colleagues in the priesthood, I would estimate that most of them would do the same. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the invocation of saints, it goes something like this: If you've misplaced something, you pray to Saint Anthony, if there's a lost cause, you pray to Saint Jude, or if you can't sell your house, you bury a statue of Saint Joseph upside down in your yard (my sister tried that one...and it worked!).

As a young man, future religious reformer Martin Luther prayed to Saint Anne (an interesting choice from our perspective) during a particularly nasty thunderstorm, promising that he'd devote his life to God by becoming a monk if he made it through that thunderstorm safely. Well, he did, and he kept his end of the bargain that he made with Saint Anne.

The Reformation -- both on the continent and in England -- tended to be aggressive in its dismantling of the Catholic piety surrounding sainthood. Consequently, many of us who didn't grow up Catholic lacked a healthy, living sense of the communion of saints. But still, we repeated again and again in the Apostles' Creed that we believed in the communion of saints. The correction to that is, therefore, to think of those who worship with us in heaven when we come to worship here, and to connect with all the faithful who lived and died in Christ since the days of the early Church. This gives us a sense of continuity within the Christian story that upholds the witness to the Gospel through the ages in an encouraging and inspiring way.

That's why this day is important. And we'll do some of these things right here this morning when we remember the universality of our Baptisms and name the baptized who have gone before us.

Now, I truly believe we're getting a sense that the Church is not bound to the present, and while we've always acknowledged that the Church exists both on earth and in heaven, this celebration today demonstrates that we actually be-
lieve it.

Think particularly of the point in the liturgy where these words are spoken or sung: "Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name..." This is, of course, followed by a robust chorus of "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory." This is the place where the earthly liturgy and the heavenly liturgy combine...so you're actually giving praise to God with your departed loved ones, with Saints Peter and Paul, with Michael and all the angels, and with all who have died in God's grace since the beginning of time.

The pastor who baptized me lost his daughter at a young age, and it's at precisely this point in the liturgy where he clasps his daughter's invisible hand and celebrates that moment with her. That's definitely the best illustration I've ever heard for the meaning of this part of the service. Perhaps when you hear these words today and when you sing "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might," you can clasp the hand of a departed loved one and join with him or her in celebrating this great mystery.

As we are connected with all the saints who have gone before in the faith, we

remember, too, the hope to which this day calls us -- the Easter hope -- the hope that our departed loved ones now inherit thanks to God's promise of eternal life. I'd like you to consider once again a portion of today's text from Ephesians; it is, in short, the apostle Paul's prayer for the Ephesians. He writes: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, 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, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints..." (Ephesians 1:17-18).

We have this day -- like every Sunday -- to experience anew the Easter mystery: Christ crucified, died, and risen. Yet, as our text reminds us, this is a mystery in which we share among both the living and the dead. Paul prays that our faith may grow through the promise of eternal life. Today, we look not only backwards in remembrance but also forward in hope. The celebration of All Saints offers us -- in a very unique way -- a junction of the past and future right here on November 6th, 2022.

Know also that a healthy relationship with saints is never idolatrous; it is, indeed, a gift to us to strengthen our faith in the Easter hope. We know that, by their faith in Jesus Christ -- often amid dire circumstances -- we, too, can have faith in Jesus Christ. And we remember both the faith of the likes of Peter and Paul and the likes of our parents, grandparents, dear friends, or just "ordinary" folk. That's the broad array of saints I think of when I celebrate this day.

The great history of the Christian faith is before us today. We join with a

multitude of saints and angels in praise to the One who gives us both life on earth and eternal life. We are thankful for the witness and example of everyone who has gone before in faith. We have past and future meeting us today, lest we think that we are creatures merely of the present. Actually, to think as such would hold us captive to fad and fancy. So we enter this house of worship once again to behold something timeless and transcendent...something that will be recognized by both the saints of old and the saints to come.

Lastly, I share with you once again the words of Paul: "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers" (Ephesians 1:15-16). On this Feast of All Saints, know that you are surrounded by prayers not entirely unlike this one of Paul's, as he and the entire cloud of witnesses offer their encouragement to us in our lives of faith. Let us also show our love to those saints we call neighbors and friends, for they are the present-day saints who offer their hope and faith through listening, loving, and caring. If you ever feel alone as a Christian, it may be that other "Christians" aren't living up to their calling...but know that you are never alone regardless, for you have innumerable saints and angels cheering you on, along with Christ himself.

And we hear the promise that the One who rose to eternal life will open the door to eternal life for us. Thanks to our great and countless saints, we know that this is for real, for us, forever!

Amen.