

So great a cloud of witnesses

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on All Saints' Sunday, November 5, 2017.

Let us now praise our ancestors in their generations. Ecclesiasticus 44:1

On this All Saints' Sunday we commemorate those who have gone before us. We remember those who lived long ago as well as those who lived in our time who were part of our lives. Their positive influence on us makes them our spiritual ancestors. They form what is known as the communion of saints, that great cloud of witnesses who enriched us by their example. Once they are gone, we cannot do anything for them. They live on in our memory and we pray for them because we hold them in our love. We take comfort that they are at peace in the presence of God.

We also pray for those unnumbered souls that we never knew personally who appear on genealogy charts and in old family photographs. God knows who they were and what kind of lives they led in their time. They are part of who we are in our time. The great heroic saints live on in story, in stone and woodcarvings and stained glass art.

All of us are called to be saints in the biblical sense of being followers of Christ. The faith that we have received is holy and sacred. For us to follow in the footsteps of evangelists, prophets, patriarchs and martyrs is surely a holy path. As we sing in the words of the hymn, "the saints of God are just folk like me and I mean to be one too." (Hymn 293, Hymnal 1982)

I often hear people say they are not perfect or that someone who they knew was not perfect. That is stating the obvious. To say that none of us is perfect is simply another way of saying that we are human. It is because of our human nature that we all fall short of perfection. Only God knows what is perfect, but why reach for anything less than what is perfect in God?

Those who have gone before us that we remember today reached their measure of completion when their earthly life ended. The French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre wrote that, "One always dies too soon or too late. Yet their whole life is complete at that moment." (No Exit) In the words of our Book of Common Prayer, we pray that those who have died may "go from strength to strength in the life of perfect service in thy heavenly kingdom." (p. 481)

We strive to be faithful in who we are as people of God. It is God's grace that gets us through serious illnesses and the losses of loved ones. It is by grace that we get through financial, marital and vocational challenges. It is only after we have been through the spiritual valleys that we are lifted up to an awareness of how God's grace works in us.

There is a world of difference between one who is a saint and one who is simply being sanctimonious. No one admires pomposity. What builds up the church militant are those living saints who are bold in their witness to Christ. They set the example for us without having to draw attention to themselves. They may not remember what they did or said, but we will never forget what they meant to us.

Modern day saints are characterized by their generosity of spirit. They hold nothing back. They are extravagant in love, radical in mercy, excessive in faith and extraordinary in hope. The qualities of their character are evident in how they let God use their best strengths for good. They struggle with their faults and imperfections just as you and I do. They don't have to do anything remarkable to earn their place in our lives. They are ordinary people who did extraordinary things. They have been there for us at the right time and in the right place and give thanks for them.

The job description for living the Christian life is taken from our baptismal vows in which we seek to serve Christ in all people, strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being. It is also found in the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. The beatitudes are simply blessings of God that bring joy. We are poor in spirit when we know what is needed to fulfill our potential in our relationship with God. We mourn not just for our own losses but also for those who suffer from war, disease and natural disasters. They are assured of the comfort of being upheld and surrounded by God's love. The

meek and self-effacing are humbled before the greatness of God. Those with a purity of heart who show mercy will receive mercy. The dispossessed that suffer injustice are assured of the ultimate triumph of God's justice. As makers of peace, we strive not only for the absence of conflict, but for reconciliation that ends conflict. We rejoice that what was thought to be impossible becomes possible in God's time.

Radical Christianity runs counter to human nature. Everything is turned around with God's standard of justice. Those who are first are last and those who are last come first. We can love our enemies because God loves them as much as us. We bless those who curse us and pray for whatever burden they are carrying. We give with no expectation of getting anything in return.

The next time you visit Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, take the opportunity to visit their chapel. It is the most beautiful hospital chapel I have seen. Examine the stained glass windows that illustrate the theme of the beatitudes. Look up in the clerestory windows to see the theme of the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy about feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, freeing the captive, and burying the dead. It is the practice of these works of mercy that characterize the saints of God, that great cloud of witnesses who inspire us on our way.