

**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 6, 2016.

*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...* Ecclesiasticus 44:8-9

On this All Saints' Sunday we remember those who have gone before us who set examples for us and in whose path we trod. We are inspired by what we read and learn of the lives of the great saints of God. We may not always live up to their example, but they serve as an inspiration for us. They lived faithful lives, some of them ancient and biblical, others historical and contemporary, but all are examples of patience, sacrifice, courage and love. They range from Mary, the mother of Jesus to John, the Apostle and Evangelist, from Peter and Paul who forged the church in the beginning to the early church fathers, Irenaeus, Polycarp, and Tertullian.

They include Nicolas of Myra, Ambrose of Milan, Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, and Teresa of Avila, all of whom who led deeply spiritual lives. We honor Augustine of Canterbury, early missionary to England, Patrick of Ireland and Margaret of Scotland. We remember Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley who were willing to die for their faith. George Herbert, John Donne, and John Keble give us a greater depth of spirituality in their writings.

In the American Church, we remember Samuel Seabury, William White, Absalom Jones, William Reed Huntington, Jackson Kemper, Charles Henry Brent, and Phillips Brooks, and the women priests and bishops, all who left the church stronger for their ministries. And, there is Jonathan Daniels, my seminary classmate whose witness for racial justice cost him his life. All of these men and women enshrined in paintings, stone and woodcarvings, stained glass and story reflect God's grace in their own way.

We also acknowledge those who aren't remembered as heroes of the faith, but who left their mark on our lives, that great company whose names and faces we remember in prayer, not because we can do anything for them, but because we give thanks to God for their examples. We are the better for having known them who were part of our lives. They may be parents, grandparents, spouse or partner, a teacher, coach or friend, anyone who contributed to our lives in various ways. They may have been far from what we think of as saintly, but they loved us and we loved them. Their image will never be carved in granite or wood or seen in stained glass, but they are nevertheless engrafted in our memory and heart.

On a wall of my study at home, I have many photos of parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, extended family members and godparents that form a photographic family tree. Some of them I remember well while others I never knew. They were all part of that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us.

Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, preached his sermon on the hillside above the Galilean Sea to make God's love real in our lives. Those qualities he described in his meditations stand as a challenge to us. He teaches us that when we are poor in spirit, we are strengthened to go on. We are comforted when we mourn the loss of those we knew and loved. Jesus supports the meek, the merciful, and the pure in heart who make no claim for themselves and have nothing to lose and much to gain. He teaches what is right, good, and merciful as we seek to do God's will here on earth. He encourages us to be makers of true and lasting peace by working to resolve both local and global conflicts.

I realize that most people don't think much about heaven and the kingdom of God, but I think of it simply as a relationship with God that began at our baptism and continues on into eternity. Being in the presence of God is where no one questions our being there. It is where we are included in, rather than left out. It is where we come to appreciate the people we never liked and where we no longer need the things we thought we couldn't do without.

In New Testament times, all who were baptized in Christ and believed in him were counted among the saints. Some succeeded better than others, though God is the final judge of that. We may never expect to end up in stone or wood carving or

pictured in a window letting God's light shine through. We can only pray that we may go from strength to strength in the life of perfect service. (Book of Common Prayer, page 481)

God is not finished with us and will never give up on us. In his early years, Ben Franklin worked as a printer and in his own epitaph he described himself as an old book that would, "Appear once more in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the author."

All of us, the good and not so good, the strong and not so strong, have the opportunity to be part of accomplishing Christ's mission here on earth. We all have something to give; we only need to discern how best to use those gifts. Being numbered among the saints of God means using our gifts despite our doubts and misgivings.

The saints are people just like you and me who, when we are knocked flat on our face, get back up and keep on. God takes our self-absorbed nature and makes us stronger men and women who seek to give rather than get, to love rather than hate, to witness to truth over falsehood. When we are treated badly, we respond by better example. We do all the good we can to all the people we can, in all the ways we can, for as long as we can.

For all the saints, we sing in praise to God in the words of the ancient hymn, the Te Deum, sung at my anniversary service this past June:

The glorious company of the apostles praise thee,  
The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise thee,  
The noble army of martyrs praise thee,  
...The holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee...  
Make them to be numbered with thy saints in glory everlasting.

Book of Common Prayer, p. 53