

All Saints Day

November 1, 2020

Thank You to the Saints!

Hebrews 12:1-2, 12-13

I grew up in a Lutheran home and all my aunts and uncles, all 24 of them either married Lutheran partners or their spouses became Lutheran when they got married. That is all but one of them. My Aunt Gert married Jimmy, a Roman Catholic, and promised to raise their children in the Catholic Church.

As a kid, I really didn't know the difference between Catholics and Lutherans, just that the kids in that church didn't have Sunday School, they were supposed to eat fish on Fridays and they had an attachment to little statues.

My Aunt Gert and Uncle Jimmy had four kids and once about every other month they would drive up to our farm from the south side of Chicago (White Sox fans) in their big Ford Station Wagon with some statue attached to the dash board. I could never figure out why that little statue was up there – but it was always something which caught my attention. It caught my attention not just because it seemed odd, but because it was attractive, very ornate, and seemingly out of place. It seemed like my Catholic cousins had those little statues all over the place: cars, dressers, front yards.

I remember hearing about St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, St. Jude, the patron saint of children, St. Francis, the protector of animals.

Being a naïve little Lutheran boy, I could never figure out what good those little statues were. After all, most of them were made out of plastic or ceramic, sometimes cracked or faded. When I asked my cousins about these little statues, they would tell me something like, “Well, they're saints and I

guess they're supposed to help ya or something...." and I'd just chuckle.

When I got older, I stopped chuckling because I learned something. We in the Lutheran Church share all those saints! Saints like St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Deborah and Naomi. These are our saints too! Saints because the Bible tells us they were faithful people who believed and witnessed to their faith. That's a saint.

But part of me has a problem with saints. Because those people were such giants of the faith, such pillars of Christianity, in some respects they seemed so far removed from me and most people. It's almost as if their faith was so great, so profound, that it's something you and I can never hope to attain. After all, we're so human, so sinful and so aware of our limitations. Don't ever call us saints. We could never be like one of those big-name saints. Or can we?

Maybe what we need to do is look at the definition of a saint. According to the Bible, a saint is a member of the baptized community of God. That's it. The Bible doesn't say one word about having to live a super human life, or have a statue made of your physical likeness; you don't have to be mentioned in the Bible or be dead for that matter. Very simply, to be a saint is to be a baptized Christian. It'd not a matter of spiritual or moral greatness, but a gift of the grace of God that works in baptism.

If that's the case, just think of the implications of that verse in Hebrews about "so great a cloud of witnesses" that surround us. Think of all the people who have gone before us, ended their earthly life, that are surrounding us, watching us, cheering us on. The stories of their lives inspire faith and they inspire perseverance in our lives of faith. Because they have borne witness in their own lives to the grandeur of faith, so their lives cheer us on. So, in the

“great cloud of witnesses” there’s not only biblical character like Peter and Paul, Naomi and Deborah, but there’s grandma and grandpa, our husbands and wives, sisters or brothers, our children.

Among them our loved ones who have gone home to heaven to be with Jesus since last All Saints Sunday: Aileen Seaholm, Bill Wright, Bev Blaise, Sandy McFarland, Vivienne Prakope, and Sandy Ramey. Today we say thank you to them for the way they touched our lives with the love of God – They’re watching us.

And what about you and all the people who touched your life? For me on this day I want to say thank you to my dad who died 34 years ago, and my mom who died 11 years ago and my Son, Aaron who died 13 years ago, and my brother who died 12 years ago. I want to thank all these loving family members for their dedication to their Lord and to the churches they served. They’re watching me. There’s grandma and grandpa Trost, and grandma Beese who I never had the privilege to know, but have learned of their lives through others. I want to say thank you to them for influencing my parents to be the people they were. They’re watching me.

There’s Mr. Bierwagon, my 4th, 5th and 6th grade teacher. He taught my brothers and sister, and also taught my mother for all 8 grades. Mr. Bierwagon loved his Lord and helped us all to appreciate music as a way of expressing our love to God. He’s the one who taught me to sing out and not worry if I was on key or not. Now you know! He’s watching me.

There’s Bob Werberig, one of my seminary professors, who taught us the valuable lessons about people and life in the parish and what to do and what not to do. What a sense of humor he had! He was genuinely concerned for us as we were about to set foot in our first congregations. He’s watching me.

“So great a cloud of witnesses,” all these people – watching me and watching out for me. Oh, how their faith has impacted my life and how that continues to this very moment as I stand here as preacher today.

How about you and the people who influenced you to be the persons you are? Can our lives, our faith be made stronger when we think of these people? I think so. I know so.

That’s why we have ALL Saints Sunday and celebrate it. This is a day to recall the gifts we’ve received from our moms and dads, spouses, grandparents, Sunday School Teachers, pastors, neighbors and friends – all who have given us support and encouragement in our faithful living. What a treasure! When I think of the people now dead who shared with me the gift of faith, I still feel a twinge of sadness or shed a tear of sorrow. I miss them so much. Their love and their gifts continue to impact my life today. They are truly the giant saints in my life. Who are the saints in your life?

If these saints are watching us, cheering us on, encouraging us, does that mean there’s pressure on us to perform and live up to their expectations? Does that mean we have no private moments, because they’re watching our every move?

No, not at all. To know that there is so great a cloud of witnesses is to have a whole stadium of people surrounding us, cheering us on, encouraging us, telling us to hang in there – to keep playing the game.

In the winter of my 6th grade year in school, I don’t know why, but my best friend and I wanted to play youth league hockey. Maybe we wanted to play because our town friends were doing it. We were two farm boys who knew more about throwing bales of hay to the cows than skating on a blade. Well, we didn’t want to feel left out. So, my friend and I asked our dads to sign us up. Like a wise parent who wasn’t sure if this sport would pan out for me or

not, dad bought used equipment: skates, sticks, and mitts. The skates were white and obviously not hockey skates, so dad bought black shoe polish too.

I was a sorry looking hockey player.

I turned out to be a terrible player. My skating abilities had never been tested, and I recall being deathly afraid of that flying puck. I'll never go to a hockey game without remembering my feeble attempt at becoming a hockey player. But you know what else I'll remember? I can still hear the voice of my dad yelling, "That's okay, good job."

That's my image of the saints. They're the baptized children of God saying to each of us: "That's okay, good job. God loves you regardless of your spills on the hockey rink...or your bad habits...or your doubtful moments. Just hang in there! Don't forget, we're rooting for you!" That's what they're like, the whole company of saints – the great cloud of witnesses.

If the definition of a saint is someone who is a member of the baptized church of Jesus Christ, then aren't we all saints, each one of us? You bet we are! The saints include people who are extraordinary and ordinary, common as well as uncommon. Moreover, saints include the living as well as the dead. One need not die to become a "saint."

So, if we are all saints, just think of the implications of that! That means we don't have to be dead to cheer each other on, to remind each other of God's love. That means we can do that right here, right now! Cheer each other on, support each other, forgive each other, love each other, console each other. We can do that right here, right now.

Today we give thanks for the saints in our lives – some long gone - some for whom we still grieve – still others who are sitting around us this morning.

This is a great day for the church to lay claim to the living hope we have through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We give thanks for the life and witness of all the faithful dead – and the lives and witnesses of our sisters and brothers in the faith. Thanks be to God for them and for you!! Amen!!