

His Glorious Inheritance Among the Saints

A sermon preached on All Saints Day, November 1, 1998, by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA. Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 1:11-23.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Today is *All Saints Day*. November 1. Traditionally, Presbyterians haven't celebrated *All Saints Day*. Too Roman Catholic. But I want to celebrate it. In our post-Christian world it's more important to emphasize what all Christians share in common. One thing that we all share in common is the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints. Presbyterians have begun to recognize this. *All Saints Day* has become a part of our new *Book of Common Worship*. That leads us to ask, "What is a saint?"

First, the word *saint*, in the New Testament, has a very specific meaning. Paul called *all fellow believers* "saints," not just the notably holy ones. For example, in chapter 1, verse 1 of his letter to the Ephesians he writes, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, *To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.*" Paul addressed his letters to *living people*, to baptized Christians who had publicly confessed their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul addressed *all* Christians as saints. In other words, if you've confessed your faith in Jesus Christ and been baptized into his church you're a saint. I'm a saint. We're made saints by God's grace, through faith in Christ, not by our good works or outstanding holiness. In other words, saints aren't perfect. Far from it. Alistair McGrath helps me understand this when he asks us to *think of the moon when we think of a saint.* The moon shines by reflecting the light of the sun. The moon is a dead world. It possesses no light of its own but it reflects the light of the sun. Christians are holy in much the same way as the moon shines at night - by reflecting God's light. Christians are called to reflect God's holiness, even when we're sinners. Therefore, using the word *saint* as Paul used it *we remember today all the saints who have departed this life in the past year who were members of the Oxford Presbyterian Church: St. Silas, St. Emil, St. Jo, St. Carolyn. Silas, Emil, Jo and Carolyn were not perfect.* But in various ways, and to greater or lesser degrees, they reflected something of the light of Christ in their lives. They were sinners who confessed Christ as their Savior from sin and who were baptized into his church.

Secondly, the word *saint* means *set apart*. In the Old Testament, people as well as things were set apart from a common to a holy use. In the same way, a saint is someone, like you and me, whom

God has set apart from a common to a holy use. Think of the service of Holy Communion. When I take Communion to shut-ins I say, after the Words of Institution, "And now, in His name, I take these Elements to be set apart by prayer and thanksgiving to the holy use for which He has appointed them." Common bread and the wine are set apart from their common use to a holy use, to point us beyond the bread and wine to Jesus Christ. In the same way, saints are common ordinary people, like you and me, whom God has set apart to the holy use for which He has appointed us. God sets us apart to point other people to Jesus Christ. We remain sinners, but despite our sin we've been set apart by God to point others to Christ and to proclaim the saving love of God for the world.

Now, that leads us to what Paul said about the glorious inheritance we have among the saints. Most of us know some Christians who have pointed us to Jesus Christ. Some of these people are still living. Some of them have died. These men and women are part of our rich Christian inheritance. Paul speaks of "the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints." Scholars aren't sure whether Paul meant that we share heaven as our inheritance with the saints or that the saints, themselves, are our inheritance. He probably meant both things but I want to emphasize the second meaning. The saints are part of our Christian inheritance. When we become a Christian we inherit the saints. Their lives point us to Christ. The church I grew up in had a library containing biographies of Christians. One book, in particular, fascinated me: Foxe's, *Book of Martyrs*. I read about St. Polycarp who was burned at the stake and St. Perpetua who was gored by a wild bull because she refused to abandon her faith in Christ. I read another book about Jim Eliot who took the gospel to Ecuadorian Native Americans. He and his friends debated whether or not to take guns to defend themselves against these savage headhunters. They decided not to take guns. They were speared to death while kneeling on a sand bar in a river praying for the salvation of those who were killing them. Later their wives returned and lived among the Native Americans and led them to Christ, including the men who had killed their husbands. Their lives inspired me. I wanted to be like them.

God wants us to enjoy the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints. I encourage you to draw up a spiritual family tree. Identify people who were important in helping you come to faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps one person was of vital importance. Perhaps several people helped you come to faith gradually, over a long period of time. And each of them was helped to faith by someone else!

And each of them by someone else! Name those people who have been important to you in your Christian life. Interview them. Find out who pointed them to Christ. By doing this, we discover a vast network of faithful believers, most of whom are now dead, who have contributed in some way to bringing us to faith.

Finally, William Willimon draws a comparison between *All Saints Day* and an experience he had while visiting the Vietnam memorial in Washington. When the memorial was designed, there was a controversy over which design should be selected. A wonderful young Asian-American artist submitted an unusual design--a partially buried, long wall of polished Black granite. Most who saw the proposal didn't like it at first. It didn't look like a typical memorial. There were no heroic figures of warriors, no impressive generals. Only a long list of Americans who had fallen in Vietnam, listed in order of the date on which they fell. If you've ever visited the Vietnam Memorial, you know that it has a stunning effect. The most memorable impression comes from those rows and rows of names. So many names. And an additional effect. As we stand at the wall, looking at the names, suddenly we see our own faces reflected in the polished black granite. We stand there, looking at ourselves, our own reflection, our own face, with all the names of the dead.

In a way, Willimon says, this is what *All Saints Day* is like. We remember the saints, all of them, not just the more notable martyrs, but your Sunday school teachers when you were a child, your parents, the preacher, all those who have preceded you in the faith. And yet, as we remember their names, we see ourselves reflected in them. We join the procession down through the ages. We take our places along with them. We focus on the saints and we see our own contemporary faces reflected in their names. "For the saints of God are just folk like me, And I mean to be one too."

Let us pray: We give you thanks, O God, for all who have fought the good fight, finished their race, and kept the faith, and for those dear to us who are at rest with you. . . . Grant us grace to follow them as they followed Christ. Bring us, with them, to those things which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, which you have prepared for those who love you. To your name, with the church on earth and church in heaven, we ascribe all honor and glory, forever and ever. Amen.