



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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ALL SAINTS' DAY

November 2, 2014

“Ordinary People”

(Hebrews 12:1-2)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

Who came to your door at Halloween this year? We had a Darth Vader and a Spiderman. A few assorted zombies, couple of witches. Back in 2001 (shortly after the twin towers came down), the menagerie was different. That year many children dressed up as New York firefighters or police officers. Isn't that interesting? Ordinary people became heroes to us because they cared enough about the people they were trying to help, that they put their own lives at risk. It's a reminder that ordinary people have the potential to do extraordinary things. Ordinary people can inspire us with their faith, their courage, their example.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews is trying to bolster the faith and courage of the Early Christians. These men and women of the first century faced a truly frightening future. There weren't very many of them; they were a small number, weak, without political influence. And they confessed "Jesus Christ is Lord." Jesus Christ is Lord. But there's a problem. They live under the authority of the Roman Empire, which insisted the emperor was Lord. When Christians confessed "Jesus Christ is Lord", that also meant "Caesar is not." The caesars understood that, and didn't like it one little bit, and therefore violently threw the whole weight of the empire against those who confessed "Jesus is Lord."

What would you say to those early Christians to encourage them to keep the faith? What the author of

Hebrews tells them to remember those who have gone before them. Remember those who have fought the fight, finished the race and kept the faith. If you let them, they can be a source of inspiration and hope. So in chapter 11 he calls the role of men and women who lived by faith in spite of the inherent dangers and risks. Remember Noah who by faith constructed an ark. Remember Abraham who, when he was tested, was willing to offer up Isaac, his only son, because Abraham believed God was able to raise Isaac from the dead. And remember Moses who, by faith, was not afraid of the anger of Pharaoh. The author of Hebrews calls the role of ordinary people who, by faith, did extraordinary things. Vs. 35, “Some were tortured . . . others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about . . . destitute, afflicted, mistreated – the world was not worthy of them.”

Then comes the point of the whole exercise: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”

I love that image, a cloud of witnesses. The Communion of Saints. Those who in faith went before us. It includes everyone, not just the big guns but also ordinary people of faith. Those anonymous early Christians who suffered Caesar’s wrath . . . they’re in that cloud, but your parents and grandparents may also be there with them, our teachers, models, mentors, including the ones we didn’t know we loved until we lost them.

Don’t think of the plaster saints, men and women of such virtue that they apparently never thought a nasty thought or did an evil deed. As far as I know, real saints never even came close to characterizing themselves that way. On the contrary, no less a saint than Saint Paul called himself “the chief of sinners.” And St. Augustine prayed, Lord “give me chastity and self-restraint, but not yet.” The saints of old

were ordinary people, people perhaps like your parents and grandparents, whom the Lord managed to use.

And have you noticed how they still have influence in your life? Have you noticed how you still seek their approval, sometimes hoping they can see you now, other times hoping they cannot? Have you noticed when expressing an opinion about this or that, you catch yourself, and think I sound just like grandma right now. Or someone else catches you. More than once, my wife has said to me, “Ok Eugene, we can go home now.”

Somehow the relationship with those who have gone before us continues. And for some, that’s a painful business because of unresolved issues. Let me just say it’s important and possible to forgive them even though they’re gone, even though they never confessed or apologized. God has forgiven us of much more than we have ever confessed, and, with effort, prayer, understanding, time, and, most of all, with God’s help, you can forgive them too. It’s worth the effort.

God never intended us to be separated and isolated from those who have gone before us. We are on the edges of Christian mystery here, but by virtue of the baptism we share, we are not separated from them.

I learned a helpful way of thinking about saints from Carlyle Marney, a pastor and scholar. Marney said your personhood, your personality, your persona is like a house. Your personality has a number of rooms: a place where you greet guests, a kitchen, a family room and bedroom. Marney said each of us also has in the structure of our persona an unfinished basement, dark and dusty, where the plumbing is and the trash is stored and other worthless stuff. No need to spend your life down there, Marney used to say. Everybody has a basement, but don’t dwell down there. Come on up into the sunshine. Sometimes we act as if the plumbing and trash and the cobwebs are all there is to us, Marney observed.

In any event, if you come upstairs and step outside onto the front lawn and look up, you will see that your house

has a spacious balcony . . . like the ones you see down south. There are people up there on your balcony. Marney was a Southern Baptist so he pictured his people sitting in wicker chairs sipping iced tea. Your people are probably bundled up and sipping something else. In any event, those people on your balcony are the strong, Christian influences in your life. Your heroes of the faith. Your models and mentors. Your parents are probably up there . . . your grandparents. There are some folks up there you never met but they influenced and helped shape you. And there are some really big names up there: people whose lives inspired you from afar and called a deeper faith out of you as well as courage and love.

The people on your balcony are your saints. The way to observe All Saints' Day is to walk out onto your lawn, look up and greet them. Call the roll like the author of Hebrews did. Name your saints. Wave to them. And most of all thank God for them, for all your saints . . . your old coach, your piano teacher. Maybe Abe Lincoln is up there, and Martin Luther or C.S. Lewis, and a few other big names. But mostly they're just ordinary people.

You don't know this, but some of you are on my balcony already. Assuming I outlive you, which I plan to do, I'll be waving at you one day, and maybe including you in a sermon. See to it that you don't somehow slip and fall off my balcony!

In fact, I'd like you to consider the remarkable possibility that you are on multiple balconies simultaneously. Consider the possibility there are people who quietly look up to you as an important Christian influence in their lives, people you would never have expected. Live in such a way as to deserve their secret esteem. Or, as our text says, "lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely".

On my balcony from this church there's Dorothy Biorn who looked at the "Do Not Resuscitate" band on her wrist and smiled and said, "It's a happy reminder that soon I'm going home." Connie Schult is up there, who never used the words death or dying. She would only talk about when she croaked, but she talked about it with such faith and

anticipation. Ethel Kaddatz, who after a stroke said, “It’s up to the Lord now. Whatever he decides is fine with me.” A number of pastors are up there. Pastor Wilkie. Rich and Ardys Loeber told me that after Theresa was born, she was hospitalized for some time, and once they went up there and found Pastor Wilkie just holding Theresa in his arms, humming, and rocking back and forth. Don Naushultz is up there who told me, “With the Great Physician of the world watching over you, you can’t lose, Pastor. You can’t lose.” Pastor Seegers who told me, “The older you get, the more you understand the grace of God.” Pastor Timmer who when I asked how he was doing, said, “I’m doing fine. Still got pancreatic cancer, but I’m doing fine.” Clem Stoll, who battled shingles the last years of his life, and when I asked him how he was doing, he said, “Pastor, if I ever get rid of these things, I think I’ll miss ‘em!” Ordinary people all of them. Real people. Real saints. God’s holy people.

The saints of God are not holy in and of themselves. They are not made of better stuff than other people. They’re holy because God died for them and forgave them. He set them apart as his own in the waters of Holy Baptism. He marks each one saying, “This one is mine.” That’s what makes them holy. That’s what makes you holy, not how you have lived but how he has washed you, not the mark you leave on the world but the mark he has left on you. The saints of God are enlivened by the Lord’s Words. They are fed His Body and Blood in the Supper. You don’t become a saint when you die. No, you are a saint right now . . . made that way by his Word and Sacraments.

All Saints’ Day is a day that makes more sense and becomes more precious the longer you live. I remember my grandmother saying the high rent of growing old is saying goodbye to so many family and friends. You begin to think you know more people below ground than you do above. But this day reminds us that though they have slipped out of our own hands, they have not slipped out of God’s. They are not lost to him. And in a mysterious way, they are still with

us and we with them, “with the angels and archangels and *all the company heaven.*”

