

Sunday, November 5, 2023

All Saints Sunday

Revelation 7.9-17

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1708357339631884>

(Sermon begins at about 21:35)

“Our Family of Saints”

Today is my first Sunday back following two weeks of vacation; during which I attended what has become the annual “Cousins Weekend.” A gathering of the cousins on my mother’s side of the family that is actually a little more than just a weekend. This year, it happened to be a ten-day weekend. On the last day before returning home, I was sitting in my cousin’s backyard reflecting on the previous week and a half. As I did so, I started seeing similarities between this annual gathering—in its original intent and in what naturally occurs during our time together—and our annual commemoration of All Saints, which we celebrate today. Allow me to explain.

Cousins Weekend first started about four or five years ago while cousin Tammy was cleaning out the house of her recently deceased mother, my cousin Sharon. Sharon and her mother, my Aunt Rea, loved taking pictures and loved collecting old photographs from other parts of the family. Tammy invited my sister and another cousin to get together at her home in Kansas to go through numerous boxes of photos from her mother, as well as from several previous generations. The purpose of that initial gathering was to categorize and label the photos and scan them so that everyone would have access to these cherished bits of family history, telling something of our family’s story.

Following that original gathering of the female cousins, it has become an annual event that now includes the sole male cousin—me—and spouses. This happened to be my first Cousins Weekend.

Over the course of our time together—this time in Florida—we naturally caught up on what is going on with each of us, as well as other extended parts of the family. But there was also a lot of reminiscing about our childhoods, particularly those rare times when we happened to all be together visiting the grandparents. And there was the sharing of other individual memories of our family members now gone, what we had learned from them, and how they impacted our lives. During our time together, I started to notice commonalities. Not just in terms of family resemblances and how as we get older, we are looking more like our parents and grandparents. But also in mannerisms and speech patterns; in how each cousin behaved, how they viewed the world, how they interacted with others. While it may be obvious, I had not particularly thought about it before. That we all shared more than blood. We shared a common history, a common heritage, a common worldview. And while each of us are certainly unique individuals, who we are has been and continues to be shaped and influenced by these commonalities obviously inherited from our ancestors who have gone before—in sometimes significant and sometimes subtle ways.

This is what particularly jumped out at me as being analogous to our annual commemoration of All Saints, particularly in the broader sense. That All Saints Sunday is our annual gathering to remember those who have gone before. Sometimes family, sometimes others. But always those who have influenced us in our lives of faith. Those who have brought us to where we currently are in our faith journey. And through this commemoration, we are provided with an opportunity to remember our shared history, our common heritage, our common worldview, inherited from our ancestors in the faith.

As used in the New Testament, the word “saints” is a term used for the entire membership of the Christian community. However, from the very early days of the Church, the word “saint” came to be applied primarily to persons of great piety, of profound holiness. Those who were viewed as exemplary models of faith and the Christian life; those worthy of being emulated in our own lives of faith. And since we love structure and procedures, the Church developed a process by which such persons were canonized, or specifically declared a saint. These include the likes of our patron St. Gregory the Great, as well as other well-known saints, such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Patrick, the Blessed Virgin Mary, etc. And while each saint has a day dedicated to them, the Church also established All Saints’ Day, as a sort of catch-all, in which we remember all the saints collectively and their collective example and impact on our lives of faith.

Of course, the New Testament usage of the term, “saint” also includes common, everyday folk. Eventually, in the tenth century, the Church set aside another day to remember “that vast body of the faithful who, though no less members of the company of the redeemed, are unknown in the wider fellowship of the Church . . . a day for particular remembrance of family members and friends”¹ who have gone before. A commemoration known as All Souls Day or the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed.

While we have these two days commemorating the saints—All Saints and All Souls—many churches in more modern times combine All Saints’ Day and All Souls Day into one celebration. A remembrance of all the saints who have gone before—famous and ordinary, known and unknown—on what has become known as All Saints’ Sunday.

While we think of the big names, the officially canonized saints, as being examples of faith and Christian living worthy to be emulated, in many ways, it is the saints that are unknown to most of Christendom—those, such as family or friends; those who are only known to us individually—who probably have the most profound impact on our individual lives of faith. After all, where do most of us initially learn about God and Jesus and develop a sense of faith? Through those who have introduced us to God, to Christ, and to the Church. Usually our family, although sometimes friends. These are the saints who helped form our individual lives of faith. And throughout our lives, there are others—those who we meet along the way, such as friends, fellow parishioners, or clergy—who similarly may come to serve as models of faith and Christian living. These are the saints we most often think of on a day such as this. A great multitude of saints largely unknown to most, yet known and cherished by those whose lives they impacted through their own faith.

This is the image reflected in our reading from the Revelation to St. John, in which he begins with: “I, John, looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” The image of all the saints who have gone before. The fact that they are “a great multitude that no one could count” indicating these are not just the select few that are deemed worthy of formal recognition by the Church. No, the vast majority of the saints are unknown to most. Yet, each one is known to someone—someone with whom they shared God’s love, whom they helped to form into persons of faith, for whom they served as a model for faithful living. Who in turn became or will become a saint in their own right, carrying on the legacy handed down from the beginning of time. Sharing God’s love and serving as a model of faithful living to yet others. Continuing the cycle until the end of the ages. To when we all meet in that multitude before the throne, praising God for all he has done. And praising God for those who brought us into the community of faith and God’s eternal family.

This past week, on All Saints Day, a friend posted on her Facebook page a poem entitled “God of Our Ancestors.” The poem is a reflection on a passage from the Book of Daniel (2.23) which refers to God as “God of our ancestors”—hence the title. An image of how our ancestors shared their God with us.

“God of Our Ancestors”

A long ancestral line of women and men
Proceed ahead of us on our journey,
Leaving vivid traces of their history.
They mark the path with their wisdom,
Fill the air with fragrant goodness
And smile with jubilant satisfaction.
You are at the head of this long line
With innumerable people of good will.
Your light spreads throughout all of them,
A great love flowing from them to us.²

This is a lovely reminder of how we each stand in a long line of saints, each influenced by those who preceded us; the influence this line of saints has on each of us; of how they continue to be with us as teachers and guides in our lives of faith. An expression of profound gratitude for the saints who have touched each of us in ways great and small. And an invitation to keep those saints alive in our hearts and our thoughts by embracing and seeking to live more fully into who God created us to be. A vision that the saints in each of our lives sought to nurture in us. Preparing each of us, in the fullness of time, to take our rightful place among the great multitude.

¹ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2022* (New York: Church Publishing, 2022), 490.

² Joyce Rupp, *Fragments of Your Ancient Name: 365 Glimpses of the Divine for Daily Meditation* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2011), entry for November 1.