

All Saints' Sunday
November 5, 2017
Christ Church, Savannah Georgia
The Rev. Helen S. White

I speak to you in the name of One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What comes to mind when you hear the term, saint? Do you think of a holy person, who lived long ago and most likely endured some horrible death? Do you think of an image in a beautiful stained-glass window— utterly removed from the realities of day-to-day life? Do you think of someone you know personally, someone who seems almost annoyingly perfect? “She’s such a SAINT!”

Maybe you have discovered the Episcopal Church’s wonderful liturgical manual called *Holy Men, Holy Women*— an effort born from the 2009 General Convention that broadens the scope of saints to reflect the expanse of Christian witness in the worldwide Anglican communion. This work includes liberators and prophets such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman; composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach and Henry Purcell; social reformers, like Florence Nightengale. Needless to say, Kelly Lancaster and I have enjoyed celebrating this wide array of fascinating saints in Vacation Bible School!

Today we mark one of the primary feast days of the Church— All Saints’ Day— my personal favorite. I love this time of year— the season of fall calling us to reflect on endings and prepare for winter. I love the hymn, *For all the saints, who from their labors rest*. I especially love to embrace the notion of a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, especially as we gather for Eucharist.

I remember learning another favorite hymn, *I sing a song of the saints of God*, in Sunday School. Mrs. Vaughn was our beloved teacher, and some of my earliest memories of childhood are centered in her weekly gathering. We processed behind a cross, sang the hymn and learned the stories of Jesus on a felt board. Mrs. Vaughn moved to Montgomery when I was 4, so I was very, very young when in her class. Her last Sunday, I followed her around, sobbing into my little, red bonnet— I am amazed at the impact she had on me at such an early age.

The other day I was talking to my sister about my work at Christ Church, and I suddenly said, “I’m Mrs. Vaughn.” I don’t curl my hair like this, and I don’t wear polyester blazers (or I try not to) and I haven’t started a home for mentally disabled residents (she truly was a saint), but I can think of no other person in whose footsteps I would rather follow: “and I mean to be one too.”

I'm sure you could all tell stories of the saints from your lives. And I think as children and young adults, we are more willing to embrace the saints among us. But, as we live longer, we find ourselves continually disappointed. We slowly realize—nobody is perfect. And maybe that's why most of "the Church" is comfortable with saints of yore.

But we must remember, the center of our faith as Christians is the incarnation—that is what makes us different from other religions. The center of our faith is that God came to live among us, in all of our messiness. And sure, Jesus was without sin. But he was FULLY HUMAN. That means, he had to have gotten on somebody's nerves.

So today, on the Feast of All Saints, I think we are all called to accountability. We are all called to be saints of God. We can not just relegate holiness to the "perfect" person down the street. So what does this mean for broken you and disappointing me?

I love a good tv show, so let's start there. Right now I am totally into the NBC show, *This is Us*. The reason I love this show is the method of storytelling used by the writers—it kind of reminds me of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Just as the four Gospel writers each tell the story of Jesus in a particular way, the characters from "This is Us" tell the family story each in a particular way. And the story-telling is circular, not linear. The episodes continually weave the past into the present, and the stories will repeat but also expand. When the show returns to a past story, it is embellished, or told from a different point of view, and the viewers see more of what happened, gain more insight. For example, the first episode tells the story of the central event of the show—the event on which all the other stories are based. A young couple is pregnant with triplets, and the first episode tells the birth story of the babies and how the family ends up adopting a baby. I am not giving any more details in case you end up watching the show!

However, what I truly appreciate is that episodes throughout Season one and Season two return to this exact moment in time—the day of the birth—and retell the story from multiple perspectives. And as the stories grow, the characters grow. And therefore the truths about human experience resonate more profoundly.

This is what the Gospel writers do, also. For example, Matthew and Luke borrow a lot of material from Mark (the earliest Gospel). But they each add their own to the narrative, based on their communities' particular experiences of the Jesus event. For example, in today's Gospel reading we heard the Beatitudes—"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." Well, these sayings are also found in Luke. However, Matthew places the Beatitudes in the midst of a larger sermon that Jesus is preaching from a mountain—called the Sermon on the Mount. Does that remind you of an older Bible story? Moses, maybe, Mt. Sinai? The 10 commandments? Ring any bells?

The reason I am reminded of *This is Us* on All Saints' day, is that the central event of the show is the birth and adoption of children. And I would say the young parents are saints, especially for adopting another baby. However, the show slowly reveals many realistic truths about the parents' shortcomings— they are not perfect and the lives they give their children, though filled with love, devotion and care, are not perfect lives. So immediately, we are forced to reconsider the “saintliness” of the parents' actions, and it reminds me of the brokenness of all earthly saints.

And yet, I would still argue that providing the most love and care you are humanly able to give to another human being, is a saintly act. And therefore, you and I can be saints, too. And we won't be perfect, and our stories will be told with lots of nuance and different points of view.

Br. Robert from the Society of St. John the Evangelist gives us some great descriptors for our journey to sainthood. We can use these guideposts as we attempt to join the great cloud of witnesses in our own meager lives.

1. Saints are folks who understand the challenge of living the Gospel in their own **context**. That means we have to be real about the time and place in which we live. We have to see where we and the world around us fall short of God's dream— no rose-colored glasses for the saints! **Be a student of your own context and the Gospel and figure out how they can intersect.**
2. Saints are remembered because they live the Gospel with **imagination** and **devotion**. Be creative— Saints do not follow the expected— they are willing to step out in crazy ways devoted to love, peace, justice, forgiveness and hope. Be creative and devoted.
3. Saints use what they have been given to live their lives into the freedom of the Kingdom. **FREEDOM!** I love to think of that word as congruent with sainthood because it's not what we assume! The Good news of God in Jesus Christ is that our human messiness has been sanctified! We are not perfect, but we are free!!! Free from fear. Free from hopelessness. And truly living into that freedom is what inspires us to do amazing things for the Kingdom.

So on this the feast of All Saints, we are inspired by those who have gone before us. We are even inspired by those around us. We are inspired by the frailties and imperfections of our lives because **we know that this imperfect, messy context is where God is most at work inspiring us to live with imagination, devotion and most of all, freedom.**

On this All Saints' Sunday, we are going to turn now to the sacrament, the gift of Holy Baptism. Today we have the joy of receiving two new saints into the body of Christ. And as we renew our own Baptismal Covenant, we are recommissioned to live our lives as **broken, healed, loved and free saints of God.** Amen.