I am not a “cradle Episcopalian”. I grew up in a small denomination known as the “Church of the Brethren” (not to be confused with Garrison Keillor’s “Sanctified Brethren” in Lake Wobegon, but my local church was populated by a lot of MY extended family). The Church of the Brethren arose in Germany in the early 18th century, and so, owes a lot to the European Reformation. It departed, however, from the mainstream reformers — the Lutherans and Calvinists — in several respects.

First, the Brethren were a part of what’s known as the Radical Reformation; they didn’t think that either Martin Luther or John Calvin went far enough. They also tried to be strict followers of the New Testament. So, from their reading of the scriptures, they understood baptism to be something that should be desired by adults, and that “sprinkling” wasn’t REAL baptism (it wasn’t full immersion — the correct translation from the Greek). In other words, infant baptism was useless; wrong candidates, wrong procedure. Because of that understanding, they would re-baptize folks who had been “baptized” as infants — a practice that earned them the description “Anabaptist” (that is, baptizing again), and the nickname “Dunkards” (from “dunking” as baptism). Of course, this belief and practice did not set them in good stead with those Christian bodies (whether Reformed or Catholic) who DID practice infant baptism.

A second significant departure from the cultural norm arising from their reading of the New Testament was a refusal to take up arms; Jesus did say “Blessed are the peacemakers”, for example. This associated them with the Mennonites and the Amish; all three now lumped together as the “Historic Peace Churches”. (Indeed the church were I grew up was “Peace Church of the Brethren”). In the United States, members of these churches could easily and justifiably claim “Conscientious Objector” status during war time — something one of my uncles did during World War 2. But, in 18th-century Europe, when battles were being waged between various nation-states, refusing to fight for one’s rulers (whether Catholic or Reformed) was a capital offense. And many Mennonites and Brethren were put to death (sometimes by drowning, as a slap against their practice of baptism-by-immersion). Many other Mennonites and Brethren emigrated to the New World, in search of religious and political freedom — including my dad’s ancestors, who came prior to our War of Independence.

This experience of persecution — whether because of practices of baptism or pacifist beliefs — very much permeated the corporate psyche of Amish, Mennonites and Brethren. Indeed, a history of the various martyrs from the apostolic age through the experience of the Anabaptists, titled the Martyrs Mirror, became second only to the Bible in pride-of-place in Amish, Mennonite and Brethren homes. It was meant to steel the resolve of Anabaptist Christians who might still meet with persecution. And, according to a Mennonite pastor friend of mine, it was still prominent in HIS home as he grew up!
Closer to our Anglican experience, a book similar to the Martyrs Mirror had arisen a couple of centuries earlier in England. Foxe’s Book of Martyrs is Protestant history and martyrology produced during the troubled years after the Reformation reached Britain — and the Reformers were met with staunch resistance when Catholic leaders in England and Scotland resumed the throne. The purpose of the book was similar to the Martyrs Mirror — exhorting the Protestant believers to stay the course, and casting the Catholics as ruthless villains.

I recall these books, and my experience growing up in a church that arose as a persecuted body, every year when All Saints Day rolls around with its familiar lessons. Today, of course, we heard, from the Wisdom of Solomon (3.4-6): “For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.” And, from Revelation 21: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” So many of the lessons set for All Saints Day point to the experience of martyrs, or , at least, to those who’ve suffered bodily for the faith. [“Confessors”, in case you were unaware of the distinction from “martyrs”, were those who were tortured for the faith, but who weren’t actually killed.]

As a church we continue to celebrate those folks, those martyrs and confessors, in our liturgical calendar, our hymns, and our art. Whether it’s All Saints Day or individual saints’ days, the stories we’re mostly likely to remember and tell are the gruesome ones. The means of their martyrdom became symbols associated with some saints. For example, St. Lawrence, who was killed by being lain over a fire on a grate, is often depicted holding a gridiron. Even in the beloved hymn we just sang, we recall that saint who was “slain by a fierce wild beast”! And, then, we sing — the children sing — , “And there’s not any reason — no, not the least — Why I shouldn’t be one too.”

That hymn, of course, was written for children [and I wonder if they sang it downstairs?]. Indeed it was written for Lesbia Scott’s — the author’s — children, in the early-1900’s, apparently in response to their question, “Mama, what’s a saint?” Out of that question grew the text of this hymn, Scott giving six specific examples of people she thought worthy of the title. The “doctor” was St. Luke the Physician and Evangelist. The “queen” was Margaret, Queen of Scotland. The “shepherdess on the green” was St. Joan of Arc. The soldier was St. Martin of Tours. The “priest” was poet John Donne, who was also Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. And that poor fellow “killed by a fierce wild beast” was St. Ignatius of Antioch. All of them special folks in the history of the Church — especially the English church. BUT, fewer than half of them were martyrs! And that, I think, was quite intentional on Lesbia Scott’s part . . . especially with her verse about being able to meet them in one’s daily life — “in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in a church, or a train, or in shops, or at tea”.

The truth is that “sainthood” is not just reserved for the church’s “special dead”. Certainly there are modern martyrs; I used St. Oscar Romero as an example a few weeks ago. But, the followers of Jesus are all referred to as “saints” in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 9.13, Rom 15.25, 26, 31). And, so it raises questions about what it means for us, today. The question is
a real one: “How are WE saints, you and I, here in the United States, at the corner of Yosemite and Dry Creek, in 2018?” We’re not generally persecuted for our faith in the United States, despite what some might have you believe. But that doesn’t mean that being a “confessor” isn’t easy. I recall Liv Hornsby’s most excellent homily a few weeks ago for Youth Sunday when she spoke of her challenges as a both a progressive and a Christian in a couple of different high schools; our YOUTH know that “confessing” isn’t easy . . . and they do it!

Confessing and martyrdom, however, are extreme examples of showing one’s commitment to Christ, and we pray that we are not led to that “time of trial”, as the contemporary version of the Lord’s Prayer has it. But we are always asked to demonstrate our commitment to God in Christ, and what we do today, Commitment Sunday, is one way we do so, as we bring our pledges of financial support for this community to the altar. But, in addition of our pledges of “treasure”, we mark, too, the continual offerings of commitment through time and talent. We recognize the various ministries in this congregation, from those who faithfully serve on the altar guild; those who enhance our worship with music; those who read and serve at the altar; those who provide for coffee hour; those who volunteer at the Pumpkin Patch, Music with a Mission, St. Francis Center, St. Clare’s, and Covenant Cupboard; those who teach our children; those who take communion to the home-bound; those who serve on Vestry and other committees; and ALL those others I’ve forgotten. THESE are all marks, in my mind, of sainthood—they are evidence of commitment to Christ.

And, that said, I would like to provide a bit of a “Preview of Coming Attractions”. Over the next year, and then on a continual basis, I am going to “commission” the various folks—the saints—who provide these ministries. What they do is evidence of committed service to Christ, and we would do well to lift them up and bless them, as they engage in their work on behalf of this body, this flock of the Good Shepherd.

They join with the “saints, who nobly fought of old” (in the words of another hymn) as examples for us, examples for which we are thankful. Those past and present confound us by their commitment, yet they inspire us. They’ve “toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew . . . They [are] all of them saints of God”, and may we, even if we never make it into Foxe’s Book of Martyrs or the Martyrs Mirror, may we, God helping, be one too.

Amen.