

The Rev. Josh Stephens
All Saints' Day - November 1, 2020
St. John in the Wilderness

All Saints' Day

Our reading from 1 John today says, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called *children* of God, and that is what we are." From the book of Hebrews, the writer lists the names of giants of the faith, these saints on whose shoulders we stand -- Abraham, Isaac, and Rahab, Gideon, Samuel, and David -- who by faith conquered kingdoms, shut the mouths of lions, were imprisoned and stoned and sawn in two. Then the writer says that we are surrounded by them. By whom? "We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." We are surrounded by the Saints. We shouldn't be surprised that the first lesson for us on All Saints' Sunday is as powerful as it is simple. God saying this morning, "Remember that you are not alone." God saying, "Not only am I with you, but you are surrounded by your fellow children of God -- a great cloud of witnesses -- and, don't you know that they have walked where you're walking, they lived through what you are living through -- through pandemics and power struggles and violence and parenting and recessions and elections and growing older and trying to live and die well and faithfully. You are surrounded by the Saints who are praying for you even now. Remember that you're not alone.

Have you been aware of it before? Have you been aware of the Saints who are embracing you now -- those whom we see with our eyes and eat with and minister with but also those who are in God's presence, that "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and worshipping God" (Rev. 7:9). Have you been aware of them before? I am willing to bet you have. I bet they have picked you up and carried you on your way towards the cross, towards sanctification.

I first became aware of them on November 3, 1985. November 3, 1985. I was 33 days old when my parents brought me to a little Episcopal Church on a hill in Jacksonville, Florida, where hills are hard to come by. It is surrounded by massive grey oak trees with Spanish moss hanging down, not a half-mile from the St. John's River. The priest at St. David's asked my parents if

they wanted me to join the saints through baptism and, in an act of grace-filled recklessness, they said, “Yes.” You might be thinking that as a one-month old I could not have possibly been aware of the Communion of Saints, but that was the day. That was the day when I became a child of God. That was the day when I joined the Church catholic. That was the day when St. Augustine, St. Julian of Norwich, St. Thecla, St. Absolom Jones gave me a high-five and said, “You’re with us now. We’ll show you the way.”

That was when I first became aware of the Communion of Saints. Now what about you? “You have been knit together... in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of... Christ our Lord.” Have you been aware of it? Have you known it? Have you felt it? Have you seen them before?

I became aware of the Saints when walking the streets of Oxford for a semester. Every building, every college, every chapel and street called to mind people who for seven centuries have poured their hearts and souls and minds into understanding God’s world and sharing God’s goodness with us. I walked under the tower at Christ Church College designed by Christopher Wren and where Charles Wesley wrote hymns and prayed and practiced the organ. I listened to sermons where John Henry Newman had once preached at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin and I had lunch where Tolkien and Lewis had beers after a long day of teaching. I stood on the street where Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was dragged to and burned at the stake. For what, you might ask? For being a Saint. So I became aware of this mystical fellowship which challenged me mentally and spiritually and embraced me at the same time in learning and prayer. Again I ask you when you knew God’s love in Christ shared so visibly and tangibly through the Saints?

We became aware of the Saints when reading *Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer this summer. About twenty-five of us took it on and an easy read it is not. Bonhoeffer says that when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, the opening we heard in our Gospel reading today, he took the disciples up on the mountain -- these fledgling saints -- and he looked directly at them with compassion, separating them from the crowd, from the masses, from the world. We had always thought that the Beatitudes were just a list of poetic niceties. Jesus saying, “Remember the poor in spirit. Remember the pure in heart.” But for Bonhoeffer, he insisted in his writing and in his

life that following Jesus means joining with him, walking after him with “the community of the crucified one,” at great cost as we are completely caught up in knowing Christ Jesus more and more. For Bonhoeffer, when Jesus says the Beatitudes, he turns and looks directly at his disciples who have left everything to follow him, saying:

Blessed are you, who have become poor because of me, yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are you who mourn because of me, you will be comforted.

Blessed are you, meek ones, you will inherit the earth.

Blessed are you who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you, the pure in heart, for you will see God.

Blessed are you who are makers of peace, you will be called children of God.

Blessed are you who will be persecuted because of me, for to you the Kingdom belongs.

Could it be that the Saints are those in whom the Beatitudes become a reality? Could it be that you were baptized into a community of Beatitudinal living? Could it be that we baptize Wilder today into the Beatitudes, into Christ’s Body, into that great cloud of witnesses? Could it be that today she becomes aware of the Saints? That’s why our baptismal liturgy is so communal and so corporate. That is why the Eucharist knits us together in Christ.

I’m willing to bet that you have seen them before. You cannot walk through our churchyard without feeling their presence. It’s the Saints whom God has chosen to carry us in Christ. They call to us along the way, giving us examples of holy living and faithful dying. And today we bask in their goodness. We thank God for their witness. We renew our commitment to that fellowship. Today we hold a citizenship ceremony for one joining the Kingdom and we feel the embrace of God given to us by this “blest communion, this fellowship divine.”