

Celebrating the Saints

By: Meagan McLaughlin

November 1, 2020. Pastor Meagan's sermon on this All Saint's Day celebrates all the saints who have come before us.

Readings: [Revelation 7:9-17](#), [1 John 3:1-3](#), [Matthew 5:1-12](#)

*** Transcript ***

Some years ago, we got word that Joanne O'Neil, a beloved administrator of the church and school that we attended as kids, had died. Although she wasn't a family friend exactly, Joanne was one of those iconic figures in our lives for all of our growing up years — one of those steady, ever-present people who always seemed to have space and time in her office for anyone. She seemed to particularly love those who were expert trouble-makers in class, like my youngest brother, perhaps because she had a spark of that rebellious nature in herself. Upon hearing that she'd died, as a young adult, I remember calling my youngest brother and saying to him, "So bro, who's the adult now?" Who's going to take the place of this iconic figure who was just always there, embodying love and grace in her unique way?

And we both realized — we were now the ones called upon to be those iconic ever-present people in the lives of those coming after us. We were now the adults. And we wondered with each other, as young people in our early twenties, what that even meant.

Today is All Saint's Day, that specific day each year that we remember those people who have died. We grieve again in community the loss of those who are no longer physically with us, whose deaths have left a gap in our contact lists, our tables, and our lives. We remember those who have, like Joanne, made an impact on our lives, blessed us, helping to shape in many different ways who we are as people of God. We grieve, and we're grateful.

The reading from the first letter of John today says that we continue to be transformed by the love of the God who created us, and even if others don't understand, they can't help but notice. And we don't know yet, John says, what we will become.

Jesus fleshes this out for his disciples in many ways. But in today's reading, the gospel, through the beatitudes Jesus lifts up empathy, a capacity for love and grief, humility, mercy, passion for justice, truth, and God's shalom as some of the ways that God's love can be embodied in this world. Jesus encourages his followers to aspire to live out these ideals, telling them, in effect, that when you are empathetic, humble or merciful, or when you grieve someone you've lost, or seek truth, justice or peace, you are experiencing God's realm on earth.

And beyond that, theologian Raj Nadella suggests that we are invited to participate in the kin-dom of God by actively noticing when we experience these things, and living out the second part of the beatitudes — showing mercy, working for justice and peace, offering comfort, approving and affirming truth. As we all know, we human beings are not God. We're all in process, becoming more and more the people God created us to be, and it is in our relationships with one another that God works this transformation in us.

There are many people in my life who have helped make me the person I am, who have embodied the love of God and the beatitudes for me in ways that have changed me forever. My Grandma Anne had a

faithful sense of humor, and a generous spirit — she would have given the shirt off her back to anyone, and in her gruff way showered the love of God on those around her. My neighbor Gail, whose children I babysat for years, had a capacity to really see me with a love that didn't need to change me that few others seemed to have. And my mom's sister, my Aunt Kate, who died in February this year, always inspired me with her sense of hungering for justice, her gratitude and joy, and her capacity to walk through the challenges of life with authenticity and grace.

Who are the people who have shaped you and made you the person you are today? Who has blessed you? Who has revealed God's love, and the values of the beatitudes, to you? And how are you different because of their presence in your life?

In our reading from Revelation today, John shares a vision of all the saints coming together, brought to wholeness once more. Often when I hear this, I think of the designated saints, those whose lives have been what we might think of as perfect, and who seem to have been — seem to have been — flawless in their capacity to follow God. Today, on the heels of Reformation Sunday, I am reminded of Luther's conviction that we are all sinner and saint, and I am struck by the statement that these saints gathering are those who have been through the ordeal. They've been through struggle, they have fallen short and stood up again, as we all do. They've experienced persecution, hunger, grief, and even death, and they've found healing in the God who loves and redeems us all. These are the saints.

And we too are saints of God, human sinner and saint, called to notice and name when we see God at work among us, and called to embody God's love in this world for those who come after us, just as others did for us. Called to bless others as we have been blessed. That, perhaps, is the answer to the questions my brother and I had when Joanne died, so many years ago. Who's the adult? We are. What does that mean? Doing the best we can to be the people God created us to be, modeling God's kin-dom in our lives, trusting God to bring us through our ordeals, and knowing that even death is not the final word.

Every week when we celebrate communion, we are gathered not only with those we can see, but with the entire communion of saints. God's table is wide, and as we share the meal, all the saints are present. In these months that we have been Worshipping and celebrating communion together via Zoom, perhaps our vision has been sharpened, as we know that in spite of our physical distance, we are still sharing the table of God together. Today, let's envision that table extending beyond even the reaches of Zoom, making room for all of the saints who have gone before us to share in this celebration together.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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