

Communion of Saints

- Mark 12:28-34; Ruth 1:11-18; Hebrews 9:11-14; Psalm 146
- November 1, 2009
- W. Kenneth Williams, First Baptist Church of Rochester, NY

“For all the saints, who from their labors rest, who thee, by faith, before the world confessed.”

I cannot come to this All Saints communion service without acknowledging the obvious. My wife has joined the communion of saints. This is the most poignant of All Saints days for me and for my family. Even as we continue to grieve we are now even more inspired by a life that was so clearly devoted to the principles of Jesus and the idea of joyful sacrifice. Memory and hope are joined on All Saints Day. Grief is married to resurrection. There is a sense of continuity of past with present and future. The occasion provides the clearest connection between a single believer and the Church Militant and Triumphant.

The goal of believers that have gone before us is now our goal: to live out the love of God in principled lives.

Frederick Buechner writes, “In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.”

This statement indicates that God is the one who makes saints; we merely enjoy the gift that God drops on us. Saints are not people with haloes or holier-than-thou attitudes. I’ve given you this list before, but it is worth repeating that some of the handkerchiefs that God drops are not made of pristine linen!

Noah was a drunk

Abraham was too old

Isaac was a daydreamer

Jacob was a liar

Leah had bad eyes, or wasn’t pretty like her sister

Joseph was abused

Moses had a stuttering problem and committed manslaughter

Gideon was afraid

Samson had long hair and was a womanizer

Rahab was a prostitute

Jeremiah and Timothy were too young

David had an affair and was a murderer

Elijah was suicidal

Isaiah preached naked

Jonah ran from God

Ruth was a widow

Job went bankrupt

Peter denied Christ

The disciples fell asleep while praying

Martha worried about everything

The Samaritan woman was probably divorced more than once

Zacchaeus was short, and a cheat

Paul was too religious

Timothy had an ulcer

AND Lazarus was dead!
Now! No more excuses!
God can use you to your full potential.
Besides you aren't the message, you're just the messenger.

Thanks to God's grace, we have a way of forgiving our loved ones for their limitations; we focus instead on our gratitude for what they were able to give us.

In the New Testament a saint is not a super pious person, but a human being who places their faith in God. A saint is a believer in God's love that we know in Jesus.

What did our saints give us? They showed us how to be generous and loving, how to laugh, how to remain young-at-heart. They taught us to live with faith and courage.

But it's a mistake to assume that you must be dead to be a saint. We know that there are living saints all over the world. We can think of Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, or someone like a little lady named Osceola McCarty of Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

No one knew about Ms. McCarty until late in her life. She was a laundress, a cleaning lady, an old black woman who never married. She dropped out of school in the sixth grade to begin a lifetime of washing clothes. When she was 12, her invalid aunt came to live with her family, so Osceola took care of her while she helped her mother with their backyard laundry business. For the next 75 years she washed clothes, first scrubbing dark clothes on a washboard and boiling white clothes in a big black pot in the backyard before hanging them out to dry. Her day began at sunrise, and she worked until sundown every day. Then when she was 87, people suddenly learned about her. How?

That year she gave \$150,000 – her life savings—to the University of Southern Mississippi for black scholarships. Reporters and photographers swamped all over her, and business people pledged to match her gift. People asked her why she didn't spend that money on herself. She said, "I AM spending it on myself." And she smiled a self-satisfied smile. (from Barbara Brown Taylor, "God's Handkerchiefs" in *Home By Another Way*.)

On All Saints Day, we give thanks to God for saints like Osceola McCarty--- and Jim Borden, Tom Gosnell, Doris Haddad, Brenda Williams and Leon Pacala—and our Papas and Mamas and aunts and uncles in the faith.

We are bold to claim these as our saints; they stand in the communion of saints who remain with us in our hearts. They teach us to be generous, compassionate, forgiving, loving, and courageous. In them we see the light of God shining; and their light encourages us and reminds us to remain steadfast as we live our faith. From their example, we can join our voices to sing: "I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true...and I want to be one too."

Amen.