

For All the Saints@

Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-7

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If you were here last night for the Trick or Treat Outreach, you most likely had a lot of fun, being here at the church with friends, passing out candy and popcorn, hot chocolate and cider to the cold little spooks that came to the church's door.

In our minds, Halloween is a fun time for little children to dress up and go out Trick or Treating, showing off their costumes and gathering a stash of candy. Of course, we are aware that besides the fun, there are a few who would rather create harm and mischief on Halloween.

To the church, years ago, what we know today as Halloween, was considered a pagan observance ... a night when it was believed that the dead rose up and came to walk the earth again.

And so, the Christian church declared its own celebration of remembering the dead. They named it "All hallows Day" which means "All Saints Day," thus making the night before, "All hallows Eve," or "Halloween."

We Christians often say together an affirmation of what we believe, and in that declaration of faith – The Apostles' Creed – we say we believe in the holy catholic church and in the communion of the saints.

Most of us know that the catholic church we are referring to is the complete, universal Church ... the Church worldwide. When we talk about the church, we mean the Body of Christ, those who believe in, and follow Jesus.

But are we as clear about who the saints are? We say things like "Don't look at *me*, I'm no saint!" when we are making excuses for not being perfect. We sing the song, "When the saints go marching in ... oh Lord, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in!"

We think of people like Saint Francis of Assisi, who gave up a life of wealth and possessions to live a life of poverty, caring for, and about nature and focusing on peace and love.

We also think of Christians who diligently worked to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, who were persecuted and killed because of their determination. St. Paul, and other disciples were among them, but there have been many others, over the years. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, was put to death because of his faith and his beliefs.

Who are the saints? The saints are true believers, they are those who are part of the Christian Church – those people who are living, and those who have died – who have

heard and understood the principles that Jesus has given His Church, the ones that He modeled by His life and death. The saints are those who do their best to live as Jesus taught.

It's hard for us to think of ourselves as saints, isn't it? If I asked whoever looks at themselves as a saint to raise your hand, I doubt too many of you would. But, if you look at the letters Paul wrote to the early churches, you will see that he often addresses them as saints, and they certainly were not perfect.

In Romans 1:7, Paul starts his letter to the church in Rome, saying: "To all God's beloved in Rome, **who are called to be saints.**"

And to the church in Corinth he addresses the Corinthians in the first letter, chapter 1: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified (who have been blessed, made holy) in Christ Jesus, **called to be saints**, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

To the Ephesians, chapter 1, verse 1, Paul wrote: "**To the saints** who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus."

And to the Philippians: "**To all the saints in Christ Jesus** who are in Philippi ..."

But, but, we are too ordinary, right? We don't come close to being perfect – like those holy, serious looking saints we see pictures of from our Roman Catholic friends.

I read an article this last week written by a Catholic Priest named James Martin. The article was titled "The Saints Were, Yes, Funny."

He wrote: "Who would want to be anything like those gloomy, morose, unsmiling people that we see portrayed in Christian art?"

But here's a surprise: even the briefest glance at their biographies reveals joyful and energetic men and women who liked to have a laugh.

Stories about the overt humor of the saints reach as far back as the early Roman martyrs -- that is, from the very earliest days of the church.

In the third century, St. Lawrence, who was burned to death on a grill, over hot coals, called out to his executioners, "This side is done. Turn me over and have a bite."

In the fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo, puckishly prayed, "Lord, give me chastity ... but not yet."

I know that the saints who have gone before us that we are remembering today also had a sense of humor and were very sincere in their faith, as well.

I did not have the opportunity to visit with Beatrice Johnston, Claudia's mother, before she was too ill to talk, but from the stories I heard about her as I was preparing to officiate at her funeral service, I know she was a down to earth person, a person who dearly loved roses, a woman with a good sense of humor.

And Jaymi Whalen, who left us way too soon, had such a great sense of humor. She even told me she did not want her funeral to be full of tears and sadness. She wanted it to be a party. She was so fun, but also so intent on listening to Scriptures and talking about faith with me.

And dear Ethel Wiethoff, such a sweet woman who passed away at age 99, although she very adamantly told her daughter, Ellen, she was NOT 99! Our visits were always about the things she enjoyed that were present in her life at the moment, and always – always about her joy in her daughter, Ellen, who visited her so faithfully.

And dear Harriett Striggow, who loved to create beautiful dolls, who loved her dog, Boone and who appreciated, so much, being able to take Communion.

All will be missed. They are the saints from this congregation who have passed on in this last year.

And then, we continue remembering and honoring those who passed earlier than last year, as we give thanks for the gifts we have received through the memorial monies that were given in their names.

Our new boiler was made possible because of Memorial gifts given in the name of Bruce Dryer and Margaret Ganshaw, with the help, of course, of the boiler fund bake sales. And we give thanks for the memorial gifts we have not yet used, given in memory of Jaymi, Ethel, Beatrice, and Virginia McDonald.

All of us have lost someone we love and hold dear to our hearts. Many of those we remember died from an illness – cancer or heart disease. Some died because of a terrible tragedy, or a senseless crime.

It is so difficult to watch our loved ones suffer with sickness, pain, treatment for the illness. It is painful to see them withering away and trying to be strong. It is heartbreaking to see families in such grief.

Of course, we must remember even those we did not know – many who have suffered and died under violence, oppression, poverty and war; innocent children who died way too soon – women who were trapped in violence and sex trafficking; men and women who were killed at the hands of others who have no real value or concern for life.

When I think of all the suffering, all the tears humans have shed over the years, for various reasons, it can be overwhelming. But then, to read the Scripture passages we have today – they are so promising, so comforting, aren't they?

Isaiah promises a feast of rich foods with marrow and well-aged wines (and I'm sure in heaven, there will be no such thing as calories!)

And what a marvelous touching image he gives us of God going around and tenderly wiping each tear-stained face of every beloved child.

I normally think of God as Father, although in Hebrew there is no actual description of God's gender. But in that image of God wiping our tears, I can't help but imagine God as mother. At least in my memory, it was Mother who was tenderly wiping tears.

And again, in Revelation, we hear in John's vision, the Holy City of God coming down to earth where God will dwell with us in those final days.

We can't help but think of the gospel of John's opening chapter, where he writes, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

And so it was. And so it will be.

'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;
⁴ 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.'

How comforting it is think of our loved ones – the saints we hold dear – having their tears wiped away and sitting at the great feast, enjoying one another, and especially giving praise to God.

How fitting it is today to remember those who have passed from this fold, even as we receive, with great joy, new members – saints who are joining us in the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ, who is the Alpha (the beginning), and the Omega (the end); our Lord and Savior who has given us this hope and promise of eternal life.

Amen.