

Saints of the Past, Saints of the Present

First Presbyterian Church of Champaign

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Revelation 21:1-6a

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "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; ⁴he 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." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

John 11:32-44

³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

In just a little while, we'll sing "For All the Saints," a classic hymn of the church which is featured on this day, All Saints Sunday. *For all the saints, who from their labors rest, Who Thee by faith before the world confessed, Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blessed. Alleluia, Alleluia!* In this opening verse, we sing to and praise God for the saints who have gone before us, those who have fought the good fight, have finished the race, have kept the faith, as Paul wrote.

When thinking of the saints, I am sure your minds and hearts go to those who have gone before you. Immediately my mind and heart go to the memory of my grandmother, Mildred Whitehead Finley — "Millie," if you were a friend, and "Nanny," if you were part of the family, by blood or marriage or adoption, legal or informal. Nanny was one of the saints of the church in my life.

When I was growing up, my family lived two doors down from Nanny. Many mornings, she would appear at our back door with "angel biscuits" hot out of the oven. Or it could be pancakes or scrambled eggs or bacon, and sometimes *all* of the above. For those like me who are not morning people, this was pretty amazing that someone who was retired would choose to get up early to make breakfast for others, but Nanny lived to serve others. Until his early death, she was the wife of a pastor and was very much a partner in his ministry. She served through the church for almost all of her ninety-one years, through such programs as Women's Ministry, General Assembly & Women's Convention, and serving as a church camp counselor until she was eighty-five. Until her health would allow it no longer, she remained active in many groups at her church and volunteered her time at her alma mater, Bethel University, where many of the students knew that they could always get a meal and company at her house, just across the street from the campus. She opened her doors to a multitude of children who needed tutoring, international students needing a local "family" to fellowship with, and even my then-girlfriend, Kristi, who needed a place to stay while going to Bethel one summer. When I would go home from college for the weekend, she'd always send me back with banana bread or a pound cake, and not just enough for me, but for my roommates, as well. And she did almost all of those things while singing or humming a hymn, proclaiming her faith. Nanny touched more lives than any other person that I know. Everywhere she went, people greeted her with great joy, reciprocating the love that she shared with them. Her life had a profound impact on my life and I would certainly not have become an ordained minister without her deep influence on my life. She's a saint. All Saints Day is for Nanny.

Another example that always comes to mind is my friend and former boss, Randy Leslie. Randy was a pastor and worked at Memphis Theological Seminary, where I worked in technology and then later received my Masters of Divinity. For the first two and a half years of my seminary career, I spent at least one night a week, and sometimes three nights, away from home. The majority of those nights were spent at Randy's house. Randy even

provided me with a room of my own, where I could spread out my books and study while I was there. For many years, Randy pastored a church while also tirelessly serving Memphis Theological Seminary in countless ways. Anytime anyone needed anything, Randy was there to help. When Kristi and I were newlyweds and began renting a house with a yard we had to mow, I asked Randy for a recommendation about what lawn mower to buy. He told me not to buy a lawn mower, that I could always just borrow one from him. And so for the next two years, I borrowed a lawn mower every time I needed it. Randy bought some of my seminary books, he paid for many of my meals, he supplied many of my needs, and I am just one example of the *many* people he helped. One day, I told Randy that I had no idea how I could ever repay all that he had done for me. Randy turned to me with a fairly serious look in his eyes and said "Eric, you can't. You *can't* repay me. That's what grace is about. You can't repay what God's done for you, either. What you can do is help out someone else, when you are able." Randy died way too young at age 48 from a pulmonary embolism. He's a saint. All Saints Day is for Randy.

But honestly, I believe that neither of them would be comfortable being called a saint. Saints are people like Joan of Arc or Francis of Assisi or Augustine. Or, maybe they are people a bit closer to our time period like Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day or Thomas Merton. They aren't ordinary people, though, are they? Well, *yes*, they are. Saints are Nanny and Randy and they are *your* loved ones whom you miss dearly and they are, believe it or not, you and even me. All Saints Day is for all of us. When we elevate the actions of a few people with the romanticized memories of those no longer with us, we make it harder to see that we are *all* saints. We *should* pray for the grace, strength, wisdom, and love to follow in footsteps of our loved ones, but such actions are not what makes us saints. We are saints not because of what *we* do, but because of what *God* does in and through us. We are saints because God has made us so. The word "saint" simply means "one who is holy." And "holy" means "set apart or dedicated for a specific purpose." That is exactly what God, through grace, does for us in our baptisms — sets us apart for service.

Each one of us is set apart for service in this world, a world in which we grieve the loss of loved ones. I still dearly miss Nanny and Randy and many others, and all of us have loved ones we dearly miss. Grieving is a process which gets easier with time, but is not something that has an end on this earth. And grieving is something that God understands. Verse 35 of our Gospel text today is a fairly well-known verse, one that generations of children have chosen as their memory verse since it is so short — in the King James Version, it's just two words: "Jesus wept." The NRSV lengthens it a bit: "Jesus began to weep" but it's still quite short. There is a lot of meaning packed into that short verse. Jesus — God incarnate — *wept with grief*. Friends, we do not have an aloof God way up in the clouds. We have a God who put on flesh to live and die among us. As we read in Hebrews 4: "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we

have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." In all of the challenges and tests of life, Jesus is by our side, giving us mercy and grace and weeping with us when we grieve.

So, today, as we gather for All Saints Day worship, we are surrounded. We are enveloped in God's love, in the tender embrace of our savior, and we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses of the saints who have gone before us. Our worship of God here today – and every time we gather – is not *our* time of worship alone. Our worship is always gathered up into the worship of the church worldwide – past, present, and future. We do not walk alone. We walk in the footsteps of those who have gone before us, and we leave footprints for those who will come after us.

The PC(USA) Catechism states this about the communion of saints: "Our communion with Christ makes us members one of another." Those who have gone before us are somehow present with us even today. Their lives are a testimony to us and an example for us. When we gather in this place, we are gathering where our ancestors, both related by family bonds and spiritual bonds, gathered on so many occasions before us. We stand on their shoulders. When we gather together, we are part of the witness of our predecessors and we are part of the communion of saints, as we say in the Apostles' Creed. Our worship is part of the worship of the church universal and we are immersed in the witness of those who have gone before us. It is as the line in the Great Thanksgiving, part of which we regularly use for our Communion services here, states: "we praise you, joining our voices with choirs of angels, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all the faithful of every time and place, who forever sing to the glory of your name." We never walk alone. We walk alongside choirs of angels, prophets, apostles, martyrs and saints of every age.

And on this day on which we remember the saints who have gone before us and contemplate how we are called to be the saints of today, our passage from Revelation invites us to look forward to a time in the future. It is a time in which God will make all things new. It is a time in which God will wipe the tears from our eyes. It is a time when death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. When we reflect on the saints of the past, we often have a mixture of joy and sadness. We are joyful in remembering those who went before us, how they touched our lives, and we are saddened by not having them walking beside us anymore. This current age has death and mourning and crying and pain, but God promises us that a time is coming when those things will be no more. One day, God will make all things new. One day, we will join the saints of all ages in worshiping God together. It is a glorious promise.

For today, though, our task is to be saints here in this world. We work on following the example of the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us whenever we gather. It is our task to honor the memory of the saints of the past by being the saints of the present. We celebrate our heritage and history and carry forward that legacy in this place and beyond. As we do, we know that God, in the person of Jesus Christ, walks with us every step of the way, giving mercy and grace and peace and weeping with us when we weep. And we know that Jesus has power even over death itself, so that death no longer has the final word. We rejoice in that Good News, that "if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Romans 6:5) Thanks be to God that we are empowered to be the saints of today, while reflecting on the lives of the saints of yesterday. Amen.