

The Rev. Judith Sullivan  
All Saints Day  
November 1, 2009

As a child, I was fascinated by images of the saints immortalized in religious art with hands folded, pious expression, eyes gazing heavenward. A friend whose church is lined with images of saints frozen in stained glass windows tells me that he tries not to interpret the grim looks on their faces as commentary on his preaching. We might have the impression from our tradition that all the saints are these spiritual superheroes, the ones portrayed in stained glass windows and mass cards. Men and women venerated after their deaths for extraordinary states of holiness or acts of martyrdom or miraculous intercession. We remember them on special feast days throughout the year and tell their stories again and again. You might even have a personal favorite.

Many believe that the saints are God's special emissaries, ready to whisper a plea of intercession into the ear of the Holy One. I'll never forget an encounter that I had with an elderly woman during my clinical training at the Hospital University of Pennsylvania. She was dying of ovarian cancer and very reticent to talk with me about her prayer life. That is until she shyly opened her bedside drawer to reveal thick wads of frayed papers wrapped with rubber bands. They were prayers and articles about the canonization of Padre Pio to whom she prayed faithfully for healing and comfort.

Saints like Padre Pio have inspired the prayers of the faithful throughout the millennia. Still, their stories, especially the long-suffering, gruesome ones, can seem so different from the circumstances of our own lives and from our own spiritual struggles. So different that we may decide to hold them at arm's length. Those saints of tradition can even leave us ready to assert, with a sense of relief and gratitude, that we are not like them and could not be like them. And we are not sanctimonious about it. If there is a metaphorical angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, most of us are much more comfortable affirming our capacity for sinfulness than saintliness.

But today, as I look around, there are no grim stained glass windows here to scare us off. The only saints I see are those sitting in front of me because the Feast of All Saints challenges our understanding of what it means to be a saint. A saint, not in the sense of those who are canonized, but as Paul intended in his correspondence when he addressed himself to "all the saints" who are part of the beloved community, the mystical body of Christ. Today we celebrate and remember not only those venerated by the church but all the saints who have tried quietly to shape their lives according to the Gospel. And who, by their examples, have shaped our lives, as well.

Let us now sing their praises. Men and women in their own generation who live on in our memories, or whose DNA we may carry in our bodies, or whose ashes are literally part of the firm ground upon which we stand. Two hundred years before the birth of Christ, Ben Sira wrote in what we call the Book of Ecclesiasticus, "Some of them have left behind a name, so that others may declare their praise. But of others there is no memory...but these also were godly persons, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten."

We don't need to look far to find them. I don't mean to suggest that Philadelphians are holier than other people, but on any given day, open the obituary page and read between the lines to

learn of the extraordinary, godly lives of ordinary people: The fiercely independent woman who lived her life vibrantly and loved instant messaging her grandchildren on the computer. The retired philatelist who was a deacon in his church. The beloved wife and devoted mother who patiently nursed her husband through a long illness. The loving husband and father who will be missed.

On any given day, look around your church, not only to remember those who have died in faith before us, but to witness the extraordinary, godly lives of ordinary people. Fellow parishioners who reach out to help in times of trouble, bear with one another in sorrow, and choose to forgive, even if they feel justified in their grievance.

On any given day, review the circumstances of your own life. Consider all those who have quietly extended kindness, or have listened, or have offered encouragement, or assurance. All those who have resolutely loved you and rejoiced with you through the best of times and walked with you through the worst of times, seeking nothing in return for themselves. They would vigorously deny it, but these are our saints, living and dead.

The Celts, who were devoted to their saints, built their churches and monasteries in what they described as thin places where they believed they were more able to encounter the divine. Marcus Borg, in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, expands the concept to describe thin places as “a means whereby the sacred becomes present to us. A thin place is a means of grace.” And relationships may also be thin places. “Many of us,” he continues, “have known...people through whom we experienced the presence of the Spirit at particular junctures of our lives.”

Doesn't that sound like our saints?. Visible signs of God's presence and activity in the world. They are themselves thin places where God's grace emerges. Through them, we see glimpses of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus intended for us here and now when he preached the Sermon on the Mount. When he shared a vision of what a realm of compassion and justice and peace could be.

Sainthood is not a limited tradition for spiritual superheroes frozen in stained glass or for those who get a perfect score on the Beatitudes check list. We should not let ourselves off the hook so easily. Despite our doubts and misgivings, each one of us, as a child of God, made in the image of God, has the capacity to be a saint, to become an agent of God's goodness and grace. While we will never live it perfectly, our own sainthood involves hard choices about how we live our lives in service to others and to God, most often in the quiet moments that go unrecognized. And it calls for courage to confront injustice and to speak to the issues and needs of our world.

St. Teresa of Avila, who is my favorite saint [Here is her image just as I described at the beginning. We're told it is St. Theresa, but it really could be any one of the many.] She wryly captures the challenging dimensions of sainthood when she writes, “Oh, Lord, save me from the falsely pious.” And also this, “Christ has no body now, but yours. No hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion into the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world.”

Sainthood is nothing less than a call to you and to me, ordinary men and women, to live extraordinary lives, quietly choosing to live the Gospel, in the thin places. AMEN