

Surrounded by Saints: God's Invitation to Prayer
Romans 8:26-27; Revelation 7:9-17
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All Saints' Sunday

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A number of books have been written in the last 20 or 30 years bemoaning the poor old church. They lament how so many congregations are so out of step, so out of harmony, with the tune of the times.

Yes, people accuse the church, particularly ones like this one, of being old fashioned, outdated. Let's admit it – you can see their point. For example, for Sunday worship, your pastors dress in the fashion of centuries long past. My stole was once the equivalent of a Roman necktie. When Western males stopped wearing them around the fifth century, many ministers, like me, didn't. The black robe, by contrast, is relatively recent. It goes back only to the sixteenth century – the Geneva gown was worn first by professors and ministers to signify that they were educated in their field. Again, your ministers wear them even today. I used to wear a clergy collar, another centuries old tradition, symbolic of being yoked to Christ. Maybe I stopped because I heard a true story about a Presbyterian Pastor going to a young children's Sunday School class and asking them why they thought he wore a clergy collar. There was silence and then one little boy piped up saying, "Doesn't it for six months keep fleas and ticks away!?"

Not only is our fashion old style but other things are also. Our sanctuary, dedicated in 1888, was designed to look like a medieval cathedral from

centuries ago. Our music, while glorious, certainly isn't on the popular radio stations' top ten list. And the Bible is a very, very old book with old words and old beliefs.

Little wonder that there are folk who say that, if the church really wants to speak to modern people, it had better get its act together and modernize itself. The poor old church had better get with it.

But I want to suggest this morning that tradition, even ancient tradition, far from limiting our focus to the rear view mirror, has a way of enriching all our vision.

Let me clarify. Christian people are those who are to do "what's right." But of course, when we are mainly listening to the voice of our own conscience, or deciding on the basis of our own personal experience, correct action becomes simply "what seems right *to me*." Such simplification, however, runs the risk of making us, in the late philosopher G. K. Chesterton's words, "slaves to the opinions of those who just happen to be walking about." You see, many of us have freed ourselves from the past only to become slaves to the present, and the present is a demanding master. Just ask any teenager about the pressure of keeping up with the latest fashion trends.

But the past, experienced in church or out of church, gives us options. He had been born, as most of us, in the "right" kind of family on the right side of town. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant. He had a good education, good

looks, good friends, and liked good times, good wine, and a good fight. His name was Francis. He grew more serious as he grew older. He was concerned about the plight of the poor, but not overly concerned. Meeting a leper on the road one day, he spurred his horse, flinging back a bit of gold to ease his conscience. Suddenly, from nowhere, a great wave of pity swept over the carefree young man. He turned back, dismounted, took all the money out of his pocket, and thrust it into the man's hands. Overcoming his revulsion at the man's sores, he embraced him.

Of course, we know him as Saint Francis of Assisi, the young man who walked out of a good position with his father in order to go to God. Remembrance gives options. It's good to look back on a saint like him.

Take the famous peace prayer attributed to him for example:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith...”

What an inspiring example for Christians of today to live by. So we come to worship to be nurtured by such ancient prayers and to learn how to pray such a prayer in our own words for our own time. If it proves too difficult, our first Scripture reading from Romans reminds us that when we don't know

what to say in prayer, God's Spirit prays *for* us, intercedes *for* us, both in worship and in day to day life.

This Sunday we celebrate All Saints' Sunday, that festival when we give God thanks for the saints who have walked the way of faith before us. But in a way every Sunday is All Saints. Whenever we sing a hymn, read from scripture, preach or even pray, we are doing so with the saints. We are dependent on those who have gone before us to tell us the stories, teach us the tunes, and give us the words whereby we praise God and grow in our faith, prayer life, and commitment.

Today's Scripture lesson from Revelation, the last book of the Bible, speaks of heaven as a great multitude so large that no one could count them. They are those who, having sung God's songs on earth in their lifetimes, now sing that song before the throne of the lamb for all time. When asked, "Who are these?" John is told that they are the ones who passed through great ordeals and yet were faithful. They kept believing, and hoping, witnessing, and giving, even when the going got rough. Now they rest from their labors. Now they are in the presence of the great shepherd who wipes away all tears and has guided them to the waters of eternal life.

Note that these saints, robed in white, are in a great processional, a great parade moving around the throne of God. Friends, you and I today are part of that long, more than 2,000-year processional moving toward the lamb. The saints are those who walk before us, those who show us the way.

I would not be here today if it were not for all those saints who put up with me in Sunday School and told me the stories of Jesus, who took me and the other church youth to Camp Bluestone in West Virginia and the Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina. Who guided me when I was confused, and put their arm around me when I wanted to give up. I'm thinking of a multitude that I could not possibly name today: like Rod Zeller, Lady Lou Jenkins, David and Christy Groves, my parents and grandparents and on and on. I expect that you too may be thinking about the people who put you here today, the saints who nurtured you in this faith and to whom you owe your commitment to Christ.

Yes, to gather on a Sunday morning is vividly to be reminded none of this began with us. We are debtors whenever we gather for worship. As Maya Angelou said, "You have been paid for." Whether we gather on All Saints Sunday or any other Sunday, our spiritual forebearers stare down at us from the kingdom. Every time we gather, we join in a divine-human conversation which began long before any of us was born and will continue long after all of us are dead, a conversation far more diverse than our present expressions of it.

As one pastor (William Willimon) puts it, "So put on your crash helmet and fumble for your safety belt when you get to your seat because, surrounded by the saints, you don't know where you'll be by the end of the service. Because friends in baptism, you too are a saint."

The minister Fred Craddock tells of returning to a little church of his childhood in Tennessee. He had not been there in years. Walking in the sanctuary, he noted that they had purchased new stained-glass windows since he had been there. Admiring the windows, he saw set at the bottom of each window the name of the donor of the window. But he recognized none of the names.

“You must have had many new folks join this church since I was a boy,” said Fred to one of the members, “I don’t recognize a single name.”

“Oh, those people aren’t members here. This town hasn’t grown a bit since you were a child; neither has our church. We bought those windows from a company all the way over in Italy. They were made for a church in St. Louis and, when they arrived, none of them would fit. So the company said they were sorry, they would make new windows, and told the church in St. Louis to sell them wherever they could. We bought the windows from them.”

“But don’t you want to remove these names?” asked Fred.

“Well, we thought about it. But we’re just a little church. Not many of us here, never any new people. So we like to sit here on Sunday morning surrounded by the names of people other than ourselves.”

And so are we my friends – surrounded by saints – some whose names we know and dearly loved, and many we don’t know. Yes, each Sunday in

worship, here or elsewhere, we are surrounded by saints, by people other than ourselves. Today we give thanks to God for them all. Amen.

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