

“For All The Saints – Praise And Thanksgiving”

In the name of our risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

All Saints Sunday. Tell me, what's a saint? Conventional wisdom says saints are near-perfect persons now deceased who have been officially acclaimed as saints by ecclesiastical authorities. These faith ancestors have excelled spirituality, lived miraculously, and died courageously.

However, this is not the only definition of saint. Biblically speaking, saints are individuals, both dead and living, whom we describe as whirling dervishes, courageous sinners, and ordinary people whose freedom and compassion strike others as naive or foolish. Ironically, individuals considered scoundrels, radicals and fools in one generation often become saints revered by later generations. Saints are the smiling, dancing clowns of God – anonymous individuals humbly assuming that something can be done to right the world when God is with them.

Some of the saints of history are Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avula, Joan of Arc. But these names represent only a meager beginning to the list of saints. Add to this list all the saints who remain nameless. Saints are the people in every generation like those the apostle Paul frequently greeted and for whom he expressed thanksgiving – Stephanos, Aquila, Demas, and others. My Lord, the apostle Paul even referred to members of that trouble-plagued church in Corinth as saints. All of that is to say that we are surrounded by saints who have gone before us. We are blessed by saints who live among us. And, strange as it may sound, we ourselves may even be considered saints. Just don't let it go to your head.

On my personal list of saints are the names of my parents, Kurt and Barbara, my grandparents, my godparents, Mr. And Mrs. White, a teacher or two, elementary, high school, and university who taught me about the essence of life as much as about the substance of specific subjects, and some individual, whose names would mean virtually nothing to anyone who was not a member of the church of my childhood. I think, for example, of Mr. And Mrs. White, our youth group advisers at Transfiguration Lutheran Church who were wise, kind, and very forgiving of and, at times, unruly bunch of teenagers. I think of Marilyn Josephson, Miss Josephson, my Sunday School teacher, who was the gentlest of souls who exuded the love of Jesus and the patience of Job.

My list of saints would include civil rights leaders and political leaders, too, people who realized that justice trumps injustice, that faithfulness to principle is more important than victory in an election.

That is only a small part of my list of saints, but now to your list. I invite you to hold up your list of saints up to the light so that you can see it clearly and carefully massage the names with your memory before offering thanks to God. No doubt, you will see that saints in your life, as American writer, Frederick Buechner saw the saints in his life, “as peculiar treasures.” Like the poet William Stringfellow, you will find their distinguishing traits to be “not eccentricity but sanity, not perfection but conscience.”

Let me be very clear, saints are not people whom God loves more than others, though maybe saints are people who love God more than most. Saints are individuals who have lost jobs, made critical mistakes, had affairs of the heart, the mind, and the body, and harboured doubts. These are people who also reached exquisite heights of fidelity, lived penitently, embraced the kind of convictions that build cathedrals and demonstrated in action – rather than voiced doctrine – the truth that God is love.

Thinking of the saints in our lives, those living and those now dead, and those we shall name out loud in a few moments, as we commemorate the faithful departed who have died since last All Saints' Sunday, reminds of the folly of seeing ourselves as self-made people or assuming even for a split second that we can embrace an independence that does not require interdependence. Interestingly, the New

Testament always refers to saints corporately, never individually. Our thanksgiving for others grows exponentially as we recognize the blessings and the necessity of our interdependence with all people.

To me, saints are spiritual heroes and heroines within the realm of religion and the sphere of the Spirit – people to whom we look up, people in whom we find inspiration, people from whom we derive encouragement, people through whom we receive a better understanding of God.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. For all the saints we remember today, praise and thanksgiving. Our worship today invites us to direct our thanks to God. If we ever attempt to thank saints who are alive, they will look at us incredulously, as if we have lost our minds, and quickly tell us that they have done nothing more in life than try to be true to who they are, to be faithful to the identity given to them by God. And, of course, that is the point, is it not? Saints are people who have concluded that their primary business in life is to put flesh on the vision of God and to live to build a world in which love is primary, right relationships are non-negotiable, and peace is possible.

So, my fellow saints, let us turn to God in prayer:

Gracious and loving God. For all the saints, those we know by name, those whose gifts we have received without awareness of their origin, and those in this place called Zion Church – praise and thanksgiving to you, O God. Please multiply your family of saints, and as wild and crazy as it may sound, please make room for us as saints. In the name of Jesus, our risen Lord and Saviour. AMEN.