

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Daniel 7: 1 – 3, 15 – 18
Ephesians 1: 11 – 23Psalm 149
Luke 6: 20 – 31

“For all the saints, who from their labors rest...” *All* the saints. That’s whom we celebrate today. It’s kind of like having a family reunion right here with all of those people – men, women and children, known and unknown – who have lighted the way for us by letting the Light of Christ within them shine out into the world.

Each Sunday we say, “Therefore with we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven.” As Frederick Buechner writes, “all the company of heaven means all the people we have ever loved and lost, including the ones we didn’t know we loved until we lost them or didn’t love at all. It means people we never heard of. It means everybody who ever did – or at some unimaginable time in the future ever will – come together at something like this table in search of something like what is offered at it.”

We celebrate the Communion of Saints, who span throughout time and space. The Communion of Saints is the union of all of the saints in heaven, what’s known as the Church Triumphant, and all the faithful on earth, what’s known as the Church Militant, including those who are yet to be.

I’m not all that fond of the term, “Church Militant.” I think I know what it means – that we are actively participating in the work of God right here and right now, helping to make it a little more like the Kingdom of God. But I looked up “militant” in the dictionary, just for fun. “Militant,” according to Merriam Webster, means “having or showing a desire or willingness to use strong, extreme, and sometimes forceful methods to achieve something.” The full definition: 1) engaged in warfare or combat; or 2) aggressively active, as in a cause. Synonyms include: aggressive, agonistic, argumentative, assaultive, bellicose, brawly, chippy, combative, confrontational, contentious, discordant, disputatious, feisty, gladiatorial, belligerent, pugnacious, quarrelsome, scrappy, truculent, warlike. Antonyms are: nonaggressive, nonbelligerent, pacific, peaceable, peaceful, uncombative, uncontentious.

Somehow, we (or at least I) tend to want to think of the church in the latter category of antonyms. After all, Jesus of the stained glass windows, surrounded by sheep or children or Mary or the Apostles, always seems so pacific, peaceful and uncontentious. And yet, this is the same Jesus who rails against the Pharisees, castigates the wealthy and powerful, turns over tables in the Temple, and, in today’s Gospel, announces God’s judgment with the ‘woes.’ Jesus *is* peaceful and gentle, but the real Jesus is also militant when there is a reason to be. So it should come as no surprise that the Church, the body of Christ on earth, is also both peaceable and militant, and so are the saints who have always comprised the Church.

The Communion of Saints is filled with people who are irascible and irksome, soft-spoken and sweet, imaginative and plain, brilliant and bumbling. What they all have in common is a tenacious, all-encompassing love of God that sees them through the trials and tribulations of this world in a way that ushers in at least a glimpse of the Kingdom for those around them. William James wrote that ‘saints are increasers of goodness.’ Unlike the Roman church, in the Anglican tradition, saints are not people who are responsible for so many documented miracles. They are just ordinary people whose love of God has empowered them to do extraordinary things. Which means that there is a very real possibility that, God helping, we can be one, too.

In the early days of the church, that is, by about the 3rd or 4th century or so, Christians had already begun to recognize, in solemn ways, the anniversary of a martyr's death by venerating the place of martyrdom. However, under the Emperor Diocletian's persecution, in the first few years of the 4th century, so many Christians were martyred that there were already too many to each be given their own day of remembrance. As stories of martyrs became more widely known, dioceses began to recognize the saints of neighboring dioceses by transferring relics and inviting their Christian neighbors to join them for feasts. We know that in 397 CE, St. Basil of Caesarea invited the bishops of the neighboring province of Pontus to join his people for just such an occasion.

Even before this, though, the Church wished to recognize all of its martyrs, known and unknown. Because there were too many to spread throughout the year, there began a tradition of just one day to recognize and celebrate all of them. This was first recorded in Antioch, the same city in which followers of the Way first became known as Christians. There are mentions of a common day in sermons dating to 373 by St. Ephrem the Syrian, and to 407 CE by John Chrysostom. Ephrem noted that the date of the celebration was May 13 in Edessa, while John noted that it was observed on the Sunday after the Feast of Pentecost in Constantinople.

In either 609 or 610, on May 13, Pope Boniface IV turned the formerly pagan Pantheon (all gods) in Rome into a Christian edifice by consecrating it to the Virgin Mary and All Martyrs. Boniface ordered that a regular anniversary celebration of the dedication be held on that date henceforth and forever more. There just happened to be a pagan feast on May 13 known as the Feast of the Lemuria (lemurs – “unwholesome spectres of the restless dead; the lemurs or larvae, were propitiated with offerings of beans; vestal virgins made cakes out of the first harvest/offering of wheat), during which the malicious, vindictive and restless spirits of the dead were appeased. So perhaps Pope Boniface chose this opportune date because of the pagans, or because this is the date on which it was already being celebrated in the Eastern Church.

The Feast of All Saints as we know it on November 1 (only feast on our calendar that can be transferred from calendar date to a Sunday) is linked to Gregory III, Pope from 731 – 741 CE, who on this date laid a foundation for an oratory (a place to pray) as part of St. Peter's in Rome. Within this oratory were to be the relics of “the holy apostles and of all saints, martyrs and confessors, of all the just made perfect who are at rest throughout the world.” This date, Nov. 1, also just happened to fall on a Celtic pagan holiday, Samhain (SAHwin or SOWin), which was a similar festival to that of the Roman festival of Lemuria, but which was also a harvest festival. Within several decades, by the time of Charlemagne, November 1 was well established and widely celebrated as the Feast of All Saints. Even with the Reformation, the Festival was maintained by Lutherans and Anglicans.

Around the world, celebrations and remembrances on All Saints include bringing flowers or wreaths or candles to the cemeteries and graves of loved ones. In Spain and Mexico, the play *Don Juan Tenorio* (about Heaven and hell, death and redemption) is often performed. In Portugal, children go door to door to celebrate the tradition of *Pão-por-Deus* (bread for God), receiving cakes (like Lemuria?), nuts, pomegranates, sweets and candies, a little bit like our Halloween tradition. In Mexico, it's the first day of the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), specifically known as the *Día de los Inocentes* (Day of the Innocents), which honors deceased children and infants. In the Philippines, it's a day to clean up and repair the tombs of family members, celebrating at the graves with food, prayers, incense, and sometimes games and music.

There are also traditional foods around the world for this feast day. In Ireland, one feasts on barmbrack, a fruit bread containing hidden charms, and colcannon, a dish of cabbage and boiled potatoes. In England, on All Hallows (Hallowed be thy name – Holy, the Holies) Eve, what's come to be known as Halloween, families enjoy "Nutcracker Night," sitting around a fire and enjoying cider and nuts and apples (nuts and apples popular with SOWin). "Soul cakes" (Lemuria roots?) were also popular in England; people used to go begging for a 'soul cake' in return for praying for the donor's deceased family members and friends, also sort of like Trick or Treat.

Traditions abound in remembering those Christians who have lighted our way. We are cut of the same cloth as any of the saints we might read about or any of the untold numbers of unnamed and unknown saints. We partake of the same Body and Blood of Christ as they have done throughout the centuries. We have the light of Christ within us as well. And we are baptized, just as each of them were, in the name of our one Lord. One of the reasons that this is one of the special days of the year for baptisms, or an opportunity to renew our vows as baptized children of God, is that we want the newly baptized to meet their forebears, their grandparents and great-great-grandparents, in the faith. We want the new saints to meet and love and celebrate with the old saints. We want the newly baptized to know that the primary qualification for being a saint is simply to belong to God. So I invite you, as you come up for communion, to remind yourselves of your own baptisms by using the water in the Baptismal Font to make the sign of the cross on your forehead. As you return to your seats, you're also invited to light a candle in remembrance of your forebears in the faith, a person or people who have been saints in your lives.

To come full circle, Frederick Buechner writes, "On All Saints Day, it is not just the [S]aints of the Church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones & wise ones, the shy ones & overbearing ones, the broken ones & whole ones, the despots & tosspots & crackpots of our lives who, one way or another, have been our particular fathers & mothers & saints, & whom we loved without knowing we loved them & by whom we were helped to whatever little we may have, or ever hope to have, of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own.

Adapted from the words of Stanley Hauerwas, let us pray. O God, you who have fathered and mothered us by giving us good forebears, we thank you for those who have preceded us. Without them, faithful and unfaithful, we would not be. Often we little understand what they must have been like, yet they passed on to us a sense of how wonderful it is to be your people. May we be capable of producing yet new generations born of your hope. Amen. +

Some of the material in this sermon comes from Wikipedia and CatholicCulture.org.