

All Saints' Day is my favorite festival of the entire liturgical year, bar none. Now I realize I am prone to superlatives and so anyone who has been hanging around St. Francis for any length of time at all knows that I have about ten "favorite" hymns and depending on my mood Advent or Epiphany or Lent or Easter can be my favorite liturgical *seasons*. But in this case, today really is my favorite day of the year. Christmas and Easter are okay, and I love Ash Wednesday because it marks the beginning of Lent. But for me the Feast of All Saints goes to the heart of why I am a Christian in general and in particular why I find myself so at home in the Episcopal Church. If I had my druthers I'd sing all eight verses of "For All the Saints" *every* weekend, and twice through at funerals!

It was twelve years ago on All Saints' weekend that Hathy and I snuck into the back of this church on a rainy Saturday night to worship at the 5 p.m. Eucharist with our seven and three year old sons, more or less anonymously. (In fact I'm pretty sure I was deluding myself and every single person in worship that night knew *exactly* who we were, but they didn't blow our cover!) I hadn't yet been called to be the new rector, but as I have reconstructed those events I think the committee was down to their last two at that point. It would take exactly three more months of details to work out before I began officially on February 1, 1998: meeting with the bishop, the actual extension and acceptance of a call, announcing to my old parish that I was leaving, and finally packing up our stuff to move about 120 miles northeast.

But it was on a rainy All Saints' Day in 1997, as Hathy and I de-briefed at Val's Restaurant, that it became clear to us that this is what God had in store for us. And while there are always good days and bad days in parish ministry, and there have been good days and bad days for me at St. Francis, I have never looked back with regret on that last night that I would worship here as just "some guy in the back pew." This, I believe, is what God intended for us: God's "preferred future" for me and my family and I hope and pray for this parish as well. So here we are, twelve years later...

All Saints' Day is about our past, our present, and our future as the Body of Christ. It is about *our past* because we gather here aware of all the saints who have gone before us, who from their labors rest. That includes those "capital S" saints that we share not only with our fellow Episcopalians but with the wider church as well: people like St. Paul and St. Peter and St. Mary and St. Francis and St. Clare. There are also those saints who are unique to the life of this parish—those who have gone before us and left their mark on the life of this particular congregation. I think this weekend of Harold, our first rector; whom I never met, and Tom, our second rector, whom I had a few opportunities to meet before his death and whose stole I wear this weekend. And I think of the saints about whom I still hear stories even though they died before I arrived here: Wynn and David and Wyla and Dick.

I especially remember those I have buried over the course of these past twelve years here. Occasionally when I sign the register I look back over those names and more often than not I am smiling rather than feeling sad because I do trust that in death our lives in Christ are changed, not ended. Shortly after my arrival here, my first funeral was for a member of the Search Committee that hired me: Jane Wilson. Since that time I've buried people like Rudy and Margaret and Midge and Charlie and Roger and Janet and Betsy and so many others. Some died way before their time. Others lived full lives and were more than ready to be reunited with their loved ones. But all of them are missed. And I really do believe that in some "mystic sweet communion" they are here today, cheering us on and perhaps on occasion even saying things like, "dear boy, what on earth are you thinking?"

All Saints' Day also gives us a chance to bring our own personal saints to the forefront of our minds. We carry them with us, don't we, even decades after they are gone? We remember them on the day of their birth and the day they died and on Christmas morning and lots of moments in between. Our lives are filled with friendly ghosts and memories of loved ones who have gone before us. And maybe also with some loose ends and unresolved conflicts as well, because life is rarely as tidy as we wish it to be. A friend of mine told me recently of a line he stole from someone else, that I think I'm going to steal as my own. When he presides at a funeral he tells the assembly that while a life has ended, that doesn't mean a relationship has to end. I find that to be true in my own journey as well. For most of us there is some mix of happy memories and unresolved stuff we keep working on long after our loved ones are gone.

My father died when he was thirty-seven years old of a heart attack; just three weeks ago he would have turned 65. At the time of his death I was precisely the same age that my oldest son is now—a freshman in college. My dad—from whom I take my name and looks and a rather large chunk of my personality—never got to meet Hathy or any of the spouses of his four children, all of whom have since married. He never got to hold even one of his nine grandchildren in his arms. And yet in another sense, and in a very *real* way I think—not just in some sentimental way but in some mystical and deeply *true* way—my dad shares in the life that has since unfolded for me and my family over the past 28 years since his passing. He remains a part of the fabric of not only my life but I believe in some cosmic way a part of the life of my kids as well. That's why even at the grave we make our song: *alleluia, alleluia, alleluia*. Because our very real grief is tempered by a faith that death is not the end of the story.

So All Saints' Day is about the past, but it isn't just about the past. It's very much about the present. "*They lived not only in ages, past...there are hundreds of thousands still.*" The world is bright with the saints of God and we are surrounded here by people who are saints by virtue of their Baptism. Conventional wisdom uses the word "saint" to mean somebody who is holier than thou but that is not what I mean and that's not what the Church means by this word. It just means they are baptized, that they are fellow witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ with us, that we are given the gift of fellow travelers along the way. The saints teach church school and sing in the choir; they rake leaves and bake for coffee hour. They say prayers for us when we are experiencing joy or carrying heavy burdens and they sit at vestry meetings when there are probably twenty-three other things they would rather be doing. For goodness sake: they go and sit at Diocesan Convention on our behalf; now *that* is love!

Today we begin our fall stewardship campaign. I'm not going to say too much about that today except to say this: we should never take a community of faith for granted. Congregations are born and die, and if you don't believe that then find some time to chat with some of our newer members from St. John's. Congregations like this take work and commitment and energy and faith and hope and love and those things are never automatic. A conflict erupts at a vestry meeting or too many people decide they don't like the rector or the music or are just too plain busy to make worship a priority in their lives and the foundations can shake. I don't say that out of fear, but out of a healthy dose of realism. If the saints around us are only those who lived in ages past and we are not finding ways to be faithful today then we misunderstand what this communion of saints is all about. We are called to ministry—called to be witnesses together in what at one time used to be called "the church militant." That rings a bit too militaristically to some of our ears but the point intended is that there

is work to be done now: and while the saints triumphant cheer us on the work that God gives us to do is here and now and we need all hands on deck.

Whatever else good stewardship is about, it is first and foremost about gratitude. We are not a perfect congregation but we give God thanks for the friends in Christ that have been given to us as companions along the way. We support this place not out of a sense of guilt or duty or obligation but because we have been so richly blessed, and because whether we've been here weeks or years or decades this has come to be for us a place we call "home"—and there is no place like home.

This weekend we baptize Katharine Jane and we welcome her as a full member into Christ. We don't say today that we hope *someday* this will take and at some far-off point she will become a member of this Church. We claim that she is, *today* a part of this living Body—a saint. She is welcome, right now to share with us in the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood: not because she understands what that is all about (any more than you or I *really* understand what it is about) but simply because in Jesus Christ, God has said to her, "I love you." Because she will be sealed and marked as Christ's own forever. Our prayer is that she will always know that she belongs here, that she will always know she is a part of us. So, too, with our teenagers, and on this day especially Jacqueline and Caroline, Megan and Ben, and Jonathan. These young people are not just part of the future of St. Francis but part of who we are right now, today. We continue to live out the promises made at each of their baptisms through our J2A program, helping to form them into the full stature of Christ. Along the way we very often discover that they have as much to teach us as we have to teach them.

They are part of us today but nevertheless, they do help to point us toward tomorrow, and in so doing inspire hope. *Because All Saints' is also about the future.* While we remember the past and celebrate the present, we also look beyond this moment to the culmination of human history. Even as we may shed a tear or two for those whom we love we see no longer, we recall God's promise to wipe away every tear. We reflect on the banquet where all of God's children are fed, and where the wine is beyond to die for, it's to live for. And the roast beef is done to perfection, rare and juicy. That is what Isaiah is talking about. We reflect on the table where all of God's children will gather—and they are *all* God's children, from every tribe and language and people and nation. That is what John's Revelation is all about. A world, and a banquet, where there is enough for all. Enough food, enough wine, enough healthcare, enough love, enough hope, enough joy, enough peace, enough life. Enough and more than enough; abundance. Christian faith is not utopianism; it's about hope that inspires us to work toward that future day.

In the midst of war and poverty and flu pandemics we can lose hope. But we are called not only to share that dream of God but to work toward making it real: *thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.* So that is why this is my favorite day of the year: because we are invited to stand together in hope, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and supported by the community that is gathered here on this day and mindful of those who have yet even to be born. We are all one in Christ. All of us are bound together in love, a mystic sweet communion, a fellowship divine.

Don't you just love this day? Doesn't it *almost* make you want to sing "For All the Saints" just one more time?