

## THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Isaiah 25:6-9, OT p. 652  
 Revelation 21:1-6a, NT p. 259  
 Mark 12:28-34, NT p. 49

November 1, 2009  
 All Saints' Day  
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Last year, Dr. Walter Soboleff celebrated his one hundredth birthday. An Alaskan Native, he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1940. During his long ministry, he served on the Presbyterian mission boats *Princeton Hall* and *Anna Jackman* (a few of you might have been on one of those boats on a trip led by John Philips). Dr. Soboleff traveled to isolated communities without churches, to U.S. Coast Guard light stations, and to logging camps. He was a chaplain to the Alaska National Guard, and he served as pastor of Memorial Presbyterian Church in Juneau for twenty-two years. He also worked to preserve his traditional Tlingit culture and values.<sup>1</sup> A saint of the church in Alaska? Could be.

Today is All Saints' Day. Traditionally it is meant to celebrate all the saints, known and unknown, and all the martyrs of the faith. Christians have honored the martyrs since very early times. The earliest official commemorations probably date to the fourth century, though the three web sites I read all had different dates and historical details. At first, All Saints Day was celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost, which is still the date used by the Orthodox churches. That date was chosen because Pope St. Boniface IV converted the Roman Pantheon (a temple to all the gods) into a Christian Church and dedicated it to all the martyrs on May 13, 609 or 610. In the early 700's, on November 1, Pope Gregory IV built and

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<sup>1</sup>2009 *Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 53.

dedicated a church to all the saints, not just the martyrs, so that date came into use as All Saints' Day in the western, or Roman, branch of the church. Later the next day came to be celebrated as All Souls' Day. The previous day is All Hallows Eve, or Halloween.

So today we celebrate all the saints. Who are they? The Roman Catholic description of a saint begins with someone in heaven who has lived a life of charity and heroic virtues. (I never found a list of heroic virtues, but I get the idea that these saints are not wimps.) To be a recognized saint, at least one miracle must be attributed to prayers to that person. When someone prays to a saint, it is to ask the saint to pray to God or to Christ, as we ask one another to pray for us. Like a heavenly prayer chain, maybe.

We Presbyterians don't officially honor the saints identified by the Catholic and Orthodox branches of the church. In the Reformers' zeal to eliminate from worship anything not in the Bible, prayers to the saints were swept away. We don't even refer to people in the Bible as saints. When a Catholic or Episcopal priest or a Lutheran pastor speaks of Paul, they say, "St. Paul." When I refer to him, I say "the Apostle Paul." "Saint" just isn't in our common vocabulary.

Yet the word does occur in Scripture. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, which he did not found and which he had not yet visited, he said this: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 1:7) When Paul uses the word, it is always plural: "saints." He doesn't hold up one or another person as particularly holy examples of Christian faith and living. He understands that Christ has called us all to be saints as part of the church, the body of Christ. The ordinary saints of the church are all those who are set apart, dedicated to God. That is the root meaning of the word "saint." Our words sanctify (to make holy) and

sanctuary (a holy place) are related to saint. When we dedicate time for prayer or worship, when we dedicate our offerings on Sunday morning, when we dedicate ourselves to God's work, we are focusing that time, that money and ourselves for a holy purpose.

One afternoon a week, Sarah Disasa and other members of her Presbyterian church go to Christcare Central Ministries in downtown Columbia, South Carolina, to wash feet. What began as a simple desire to share worship services has united a small urban church and a large suburban church, as they have formed a joint team to provide foot care for homeless people in their city. They are also in partnership with a network that obtains free medical services for foot care clients.<sup>2</sup> In a list of good deeds, the writer to Timothy includes washing the feet of the saints. (1 Timothy 5:10) Might Sarah be a saint, as well as those whose feet she is washing? Is that afternoon of foot care a holy time? Could be.

None of us here today qualifies as a saint according to Roman Catholic standards. For one thing, we're not dead. But Paul called a living congregation "saints." When we casually call someone a saint, we usually mean that they don't get angry, or they never say anything negative, or they do the dirty work without complaint, or they live patiently with someone really difficult. Even by those standards, hardly any of us would qualify as a saint. Let me suggest a different set of criteria.

First, a couple of things that aren't saintly. The people I'd consider saintly aren't passive doormats. In fact, they can be rather persistent, sometimes loudly persistent. They aren't necessarily solemn or formal – no baptized-in-lemon-juice looks on the face. And I

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 319.

don't think a saint talks only about God. A saint can enjoy the world series, or a fresh-baked cookie, or a good mystery.

A saint is someone who is focused on God and God's purposes. The scribe asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus answered with the holiest words of the Torah: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." No one does that perfectly, but if that is our call and our purpose, if we take God seriously, we are on the way. A saint, I think, is someone who is in touch with God in all parts of life – in humble work, in the beauty of nature, in music of praise, even in tears of sorrow. Brother Lawrence, who lived well over three hundred years ago, called that way of life, "practicing the presence of God."

A saint is also one who helps. Jesus continued with his answer, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." A saint lives to serve others – not compulsively to the point of burnout, but willingly thinking of others and doing what is possible. If you ever find yourself focusing too much inward, and who doesn't from time to time, try helping someone else. I think that's why the Community Meals are going so well – everyone is benefitting on Tuesday evening. The kitchen and serving tables and dining tables are full of holy blessing.

The way isn't easy. The forces of evil on the outside and our own tendency to be at least a little lazy can get us off track. Yet it is possible to live in God's presence and help others along the way, even in the face of opposition. That's why Scripture gives us those words of comfort and hope: "God will wipe away every tear."

In July I told the story I had heard at the last presbytery meeting, about Muthier Alsaqa, the Iraqi Christian elder who was threatened and eventually killed by kidnappers because he

refused to close the Presbyterian church in Mosul. He had told his son, “People die in Iraq every day for no reason at all – they’re just in the wrong place when a bomb goes off. If I’m going to die, it will be for a good reason, for my Christian faith.” And he did.

We are part of the living communion of saints – including Muthier Alsaqa, ordinary Christians doing foot care in South Carolina, an Alaska native who has pointed people toward God with respect for his own spiritual traditions. Each of us has had people who blessed us and pointed us toward God, sometimes at great cost. Those are our saints – a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a friend, even a child. If someone comes to mind, give thanks for him or her.

The saints of Bible and church, our own personal saints, and all those faithful followers of Christ, unknown to us but known to God, surround us here. We are all on the way together, toward God. As we honor them, I hope we will examine our own faith and our own commitment to the purposes of God. At this table, in the company of all the saints, may we dedicate ourselves once more to love God and neighbors with all that we are.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we thank you for those strong in faith who point us toward you and encourage us on the way. Like them, may we live in faith and serve with joy. Amen.