

## **“ATTENTIVELY, TOGETHER”**

1 John 3:1-3; Revelation 7:9-17

November 5, 2023

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All Saints' Sunday asks us to pay attention to some things we might, on most ordinary days, rather look away from.

First of all: death, and its companion, grief.

As we remember those in our community of faith and in our circles of friends and family who have died in the past year, some of our grief is very fresh. We are still coming to terms with the empty place, the fact that we can't see or touch or hear our loved ones, all the ways the loss has changed our world. On this day of remembering, we can't help also revisiting older griefs, the other deaths and losses that have marked our lives through the years. As time goes by, perhaps the sharp pain has softened a bit, and cherished memories and gratitude moved more to the forefront of our minds... but there remains the central, inescapable reality that death and grief are a part of life.

One of the gifts of this day is that it reminds us that we are together in this. Our specific losses and the ways in which we grieve are very individual, of course – and can feel lonely – but we all share in this most human of experiences. And on this day, we remember that. We pay attention to this reality, together. We pray. We care, and try to show it. We lean into the communion of saints, which includes the faithful folks around us as well as the ones we no longer have with us.

Paying attention to the reality of death inevitably leads to the uncomfortable truth that each one of us has only so much time on this earth, and to questions about what we're doing with that time. Which might spur us to be attentive in some different directions.

For example, what if we *really* paid attention to the gifts that fill the moments of our lives, even on the hard days? the color of the sky at sunset, the enticing smell of dinner, the deliciousness of ice cream, the wonders of technology that let us send messages and pictures instantly to family far away, the tv show that makes us laugh out loud, a favorite comfortable shirt, the safety of home, the fun of learning a new thing... whatever the day's gifts might be, they're not to be taken for granted. They're not infinite.

So we might also pay attention to what we want the days and years of our life to mean. We might start asking ourselves, “what kind of legacy do I want to leave? what kind of difference do I want to make? what values do I want to pass on” Maybe even, “what do I need to do differently?”

Which, for me at least, turns my attention to *people*, to people whose lives offer glimpses – and examples - of grace. Do we need to pay more attention to the helpers, to the quietly faithful and caring folks, to the people who surprise you with their wit and wisdom, to those who always show up when there's a need, to the people who love us no matter what, to the friends who help us be our better selves, to the ones who bring a calm spirit to the tensest situation, to the generous hearts, to the prayerful souls, to those who speak the truth even when it's hard? It seems to me that more aware we are of how short life is, the more necessary it feels to appreciate – and learn from - the saints who are in our lives now.

Paying attention to the fact of death somehow ends up being an invitation to pay attention to a lot of important things about *life*.

Another thing All Saints Sunday asks us to pay attention to is the fact that our lives are part of something much bigger than ourselves. Despite all that our culture does to encourage individualism, there's something profoundly comforting about the "communion of saints" - a sense of connection and belonging, grounding and perspective.

But when we really turn our attention to the communion of saints, we find ourselves again in uncomfortable territory.

For one thing, it's not easy to see ourselves among "the saints." Even though we Protestants don't have "officially" designated saints as other Christian traditions do, we are familiar with those saints whose images grace stained glass windows and have biographies involving strange visions and gruesome martyrdom, not to mention great piety and holiness. We don't see ourselves there. It's almost as hard to see ourselves in others we might name as saints – for their compassion or championing of justice or their teaching or the beauty and knowledge they contributed to the world. It's not just false modesty; I'm not sure I *want* to make the kind of sacrifices that would cause anybody to refer to me as a saint. Maybe you feel that way, too.

But that's not all. In the communion of saints we find ourselves allied with people, past and present, we really would rather *not* be associated with. It's no secret that the Christian church has played an active part in wars, persecutions, exploitation, racism, and the like throughout history. We usually distance ourselves from those actions, and make every effort to say that they don't represent genuine Christianity, that they don't reflect Jesus. But they came from people who situated themselves in the communion of saints, just as we do on this All Saints' Sunday.

It's not any easier with respect to our contemporaries; we often cringe at the thought of being associated with the kind of "Christianity" that's most visible and vocal – and often narrow, judgmental, and controlling. In this context, the "communion of saints" doesn't feel like a place to belong.

Maybe we should just carefully back away from the whole idea and ignore it, at least until next All Saints' Sunday.

But here we are, on this All Saints' Sunday, inconveniently reminded that we are all connected, all part of the same body, all in the communion of saints together. I'm not going to pretend that I know what to do with that. As a practical reality, it seems absurd to talk about unity when values are diametrically opposed.

I do take seriously the possibility that, as Jesus said, not everyone who uses his name is truly his follower. But it's never easy to tell who's sincere and who might be simply using the language of Christianity for their own purposes. I also take seriously the fact that we are all flawed, fallible human beings, who fall short even when we're trying to be faithful. So we probably aren't in a position to say who is or isn't part of the body of Christ. Maybe we can't take the easier path of saying "this person, that group, those actions aren't (or weren't) really Christian."

What this means, I think, is that we have to lean into the communion of saints with some humility. ALL the saints of every time, however we identify them, were mere, flawed human beings, like us. Like the complicated characters of the Bible, they struggled with doubt, anger, fear, pride, troubled minds, mistaken ideas, the limitations of their time and place. Even some of those we most admire for their faith or leadership or accomplishment also held beliefs we find wrong and offensive, disregarded the needs of those around them, did things that were far from admirable, or set destructive events in motion.

The communion of saints is a mysterious connection that exists NOT because of anybody's objective saintliness – certainly not ours – but because we belong to God. And that brings me (finally) to our scriptures:

John writes, "See what love we have, that we should be called God's children." This is the belonging that the "communion of saints" wraps us up in... the unconditional, parental love of God that we are learning – however slowly – to accept and make our own. John goes on to say that "it hasn't yet appeared what we will be." To me this is reassurance that the communion of saints will eventually, somehow, in God's hands and God's time, be more whole and holy than it now is.

What John writes about purifying ourselves troubled me a bit. Misguided ideas about keeping oneself or the church "pure" have been the source of untold harm – exclusion, abuse, shame, and some of those aforementioned wars. This way of thinking has often kept the church aloof, isolated, self-protective, and turned inward. How to make sense of this? Then I noticed that God's children are to be pure "as God is." Well then. God's intention to us is far from aloof and excluding. God's way of being is *being with us*. We are beloved children of the God who is love. I remember this most beautiful quote from Soren Kierkegaard, which puts the whole idea of purity in a different light: "Purity of heart is to will one thing." The one thing God wills above all is love. The communion of saints is the school in which we learn to will love.

From Revelation we read about a vision of the communion of saints: a great crowd, too many to count, diverse, from every place and group. John wrote this (and the whole book really) for people who were living through a time of persecution, division, deprivation, fear, and grief,

people who didn't have a lot of objective reason for joy, or hope. But here he offers this picture, this promise of people like them – and people like us and like our beloveds who have died, people like all the complicated, broken saints - gathered in God's presence, forgiven and whole at last. Not hungry or thirsty or in pain any more. Tears wiped away. United at last in gratitude and love for God who has loved us all along. The ultimate All Saints' Day.

I find All Saints Sunday a beautiful day, bittersweet and joyful at the same time, filled with both memories and promises. But it's a challenging day, too, because it does ask us to pay attention to really hard things like death and the deeply flawed ways we have lived out the best intentions of our faith. Those hard things, though, also can be the lenses through which we really focus our attention on the profound and transformative love of God, and God's loving purposes for our lives. Together, we can do that. Amen?

Resources:

Catherine Woodwiss "A More Hallowed Eve," *Sojourners*, October 29, 2015