

"Giving and Gaining." Revelation 7:9-17; Ps. 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
All Saints' Sunday, November 2, 2008

I have to confess I grew up with a bias against Saints. Saints were found in the Catholic Church, not the Presbyterian Church. My neighborhood in Philadelphia had pretty clear lines drawn between its Protestant and Catholic families.

The Catholics said the rosary and prayed to Mary and the Saints. Their churches had statues of saints. We Protestants didn't have any statues in church. We didn't get to have rosary beads. We were taught we didn't need to pray to Mary or anyone but Jesus.

Catholics got to go to church on Saturday night, dressed pretty casually, and they could sleep in on Sunday. We Protestant kids had to get up on Sunday, put on a coat and tie, and behave all day. (At least we didn't have to wear a uniform to school like they did...)

When I was growing up we didn't celebrate All Saints' Day. That was too Catholic. We'd have a great time on Halloween, but no one told us that Halloween was "All Hallow's Eve" the night before "All Hallow's," that is, "All Saints' Day". What were good, God-fearing Protestants supposed to do with that information anyway? Was it conceivable that we would ever celebrate "All Saints' Day"???

It has taken Protestant denominations almost 500 years to figure out that not everything from Church History had to be thrown out for the sake of establishing a distinctive way of being Christ's followers.

All Saints' Day honors Christian Martyrs. Their powerful witness to their Lord had a profound impact not only on the Church, but also on

the non-Christians living around them. Whenever someone is willing to die for what they believe to be TRUE, it does have a way of getting people's attention.

Today we are inspired by their courageous faith and we have to wonder how we might have withstood such tests if we were in their place.

Although we think of Christian Martyrs as those who were devoured by lions in the Roman Coliseum, we might be surprised to know that there have been more Christian Martyrs in the last 100 years than in all the previous centuries combined! Even today there are Christians in our world who are facing death because they refuse to deny the Lord of Life. Christians in the Sudan, in Iraq, in India (to name but a few places in our world) are enduring hardship, persecution and death because of their faith in Christ.

So, we not only celebrate All Saints' Day as an occasion to GIVE THANKS FOR THE LIVES OF CHRISTIAN MARTYRS OF LONG AGO, we also celebrate All Saints' Day as a time to stand in solidarity with Christians the world over, and recommit ourselves to being the kind of men and women of faith who make a clear witness and a positive impact for Christ upon the world around us.

Another reason to celebrate this day is to Give Thanks for the Ordinary Saints of our Church and of our lives whose steadfast faith and quiet witness has helped to nurture and to shape our faith.

Today we give thanks for parents and grandparents and other family members, teachers and pastors, the neighbor up the road and the co-worker across the room - - all the people who are the saints of our lives not because they were so "holy" and "good" but because they made their commitment to Jesus Christ a matter of first priority in their lives and their lives have, in turn, shaped ours.

We thank God for those who taught us to pray, who showed us how to worship, who pointed to the words of the hymns and filled our lives with music, and modeled for us what it means to be in Christian community with one another. They taught us to trust God with our salvation and to rely upon God and know that God is with us, no matter what.

We celebrate this day for all the saints of the Church of Jesus Christ and we give thanks and praise to God who holds us together in the one, universal and timeless communion of saints in heaven and on earth.

As we come to this table, it is in gratitude to God for the gift of salvation through Jesus our Lord, and it is with awe and wonder at the way God is able to make us one and to sustain us through these simple but holy things - - a bit of bread, a sip of juice.

As we share this meal we do so in the presence of the great cloud of witnesses who have trained us in righteousness. Even now they are encouraging us to continue to run with perseverance the race that is set before us as Christ's disciples. They are reminding us that we are children of God. There is a family resemblance in us. The heart of God's love beats in us.

Each of us has a special place in God's heart because of this gift of love. It is a gift that we, in turn, are asked to share. We are asked to return this gift of love to God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We are also challenged to extend this gift of love to all whom we encounter: Loving our neighbors as ourselves.

In John's first letter he talks at length about love. For John it is a present reality and it is the driving force that energizes the people of

God, the saints here on earth. John also is quick to remind us that love is something we do, not just something we feel.

As an active force and a gift from God, those who are called to be God's children are given God's love as an inheritance to use in a spendthrift way as we make our way in the world.

As a church we are trying to make God's love real in various ways, not the least of which is through our giving. We want giving to be part of our DNA, as it were. We are striving to be known as a congregation that looks beyond itself to the needs of the wider human family. This is, first and foremost, an act of love. We may call it mission, we may describe it as service, but at its heart there beats a heart. It is God's heart and God's active love at work in us and through us.

Joan Chittister, a well-known Benedictine nun and author, takes it a little further and draws a connection between loving and giving and hospitality. This is some of what she has to say in her book on the Wisdom of the monastic tradition,

"Some people call it foolish. We can't possibly feed everyone who is hungry. The few things we have to give - a picture here, a blouse there, a knickknack perhaps, a small tape recorder maybe - won't fill anyone's home or add much to their barren lives. They are essentially useless things in a hopeless situation. It all seems to be an impossible venture. And where will the money and gifts come from to keep it up?

"...real (Christian Community) requires us to pour ourselves out for the other, to give ourselves away, to provide the staples of life, both material and spiritual, for one another. The question is not whether what we have to give is sufficient for the situation or not. The question is simply whether or not we have anything to give. That's what

hospitality is all about. Not abundance and not totality. Just sharing. Real sharing." (Wisdom Distilled from the Daily, p. 123)

The sharing we practice is based on the sharing that we have experienced as we have come to know Jesus Christ - God's abundant, total, extravagant and perfect sharing of himself with us.

It is because of what we have already received from God that we have the courage to continue to extend ourselves toward others, trusting in the abundance that God provides. And as we extend ourselves toward others we have a vision in mind, the vision of communion with God.

Like the saints in the vision from the book of Revelation, we know there is a glorious future awaiting us. The saints who have gone before us gained their hearts' desire, namely, to be near to the heart of God.

It didn't happen because they were such great people. It happened because they were caught up in the flow of the unstoppable love of God. They gave themselves away for it and, in return, they gained all things.

Brothers and sister, we are the children of God, here and now. We have already gained the great gift of salvation. Our challenge is to be as Christ-like as possible and to make our "family resemblance" to Christ obvious to each other and to the world as we await the completion of our communion with God and with the Saints.

What a wonderful opportunity we have: to give ourselves away with faith, ... in hope, ... and out of love! May God ease our anxiety, calm our fears, relax our clenched fists and keep us open to giving and gaining love, always with thanksgiving for what God has done for us in Christ. Amen.