

ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY

But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever—for ever and ever. Daniel 7:18

All Saints' Sunday. In many ways, my favorite feast of the Church. We have no fanfare – indeed, little to no awareness– of this festival, in the secular world, and not so much in the Church, either. I have time and space to savor the meaning of the day– less possible with all the preparation and the public nature of Christmas and Easter.

Also, I think I love All Saints' Sunday because our focus today is on humanity– on the vast multitudes of the faithful, past, present, and to come– who have followed Jesus. In my business we talk about having horizontal and vertical relationships with God. Vertical...that's our connection with the God up there, out there, the ineffable, majestic one. Horizontal... that 's our connection with the living Christ, the people whom we know or know of, whom we love and admire, those who seem to embody the spirit of love and justice exemplified by Jesus.

I find the Holy much more often in the horizontal, in the here and now, in relationships and in community. The spiritual high point of my week, most weeks, comes as I proceed around the communion circle, offering the Body and Blood of Christ to God's faithful servants – to all of you. You saints.

Yes, you. We use All Saints' Day not to venerate the superstars of the faith, but to celebrate the priesthood of all believers. All of us as Christians together, the living and the departed, are the *great cloud of witnesses*, are saints of God.

Our passage from Daniel today– part of Daniel's vision, speaks of the *holy ones of the Most High inheriting the kingdom forever and ever*. The Hebrew word for holy ones does not mean saints– does not mean *pious or kind*– it means *set apart*. And like it or not, we are set apart – we have set ourselves apart by the very act of church-going, of standing in that communion circle, of dedicating our lives, in some way, to serving God.

Here's a little church history about All Saints' Day. In the high Middle Ages, before the Reformation, more and more individuals were being canonized, sometimes for good deeds and miracles and sometimes for more suspect “gifts”: political machinations or big financial donations to the Church. The calendar of saints' holy days was getting very crowded, and the Western Church invented All Saints' Day to honor all the “minor” saints whom they couldn't stuff onto the official calendar. Originally the feast was meant to commemorate those leftover “spiritual” celebrities.

But the reformers weren't so high on saints. They kept a good many of the principal feasts and fasts of the Western calendar, as we still do, but they purged the dense excesses of commemoration, and low-keyed the feast of All Saints.

With the liturgical renewal of the 60's and 70's, we have revived the celebration of this feast, but now we emphasize not the superstars of spiritual history, but the priesthood, indeed the sainthood, the *set-apartness*, of all believers.

So how do we think about this sainthood business, this *set-apartness*, for ourselves? A couple of things I've read about saints have appealed to you when I have mentioned them in previous sermons, so I'll repeat them, and maybe they'll have some resonance.

One: a saint is a person who does ordinary things extraordinarily well.

Two: a saint is someone who is often wearing a faint, barely discernable smile.

And then several other things have come to mind as I've meditated about this sermon. Someone, maybe Philo of Alexandria, a First Century philosopher, or maybe Anonymous, said, *be kind to everyone, for everyone is fighting a great battle.*

May Sarton, 20th century poet and memoirist, said, *just getting through every day is heroic.*

And also, into my head came the lyrics of the Jackson Browne song, *Fountain of Sorrows*. This is one of my absolute all-time favorites, and for years I only knew it as Joan Baez sung it. But then I heard Jackson Browne, and I heard the final verse of the song for the first time. It's this.

*Fountain of sorrow, fountain of light
You've known that hollow sound of your own steps in flight
You've had to struggle, you've had to fight
To keep understanding and compassion in sight
You could be laughing at me, you've got the right
But you go on smiling so clear and so bright*

When I heard this I couldn't imagine why Joan would have omitted it. To me, it says so much about love: seasoned, difficult, *real* love. Love of a lover, love of a friend. Jesus' kind of love.

I have this version of the song on a C.D. mix given to me for Christmas by my friend Jep a couple of years ago. He called the C.D. "Compassion." I know why he did, I think. Years ago, and a couple of you may remember this, a parishioner here told me I

had no compassion. His accusation devastated me. No matter how many friends and colleagues tried to console me, no matter how many people said, “that’s ridiculous” or “consider the source,” I obsessed about the comment for several years. I brooded. I talked to my spiritual director about it; I wrote a paper about it.

Obviously, this parishioner struck some nerve deep within me, some deep doubt or insecurity about myself and my ministry. I’m not a warm fuzzy person, I knew that. Did that mean I had no compassion? What *was* compassion, anyway?

What freed me from my deep hurt and confusion was, finally, reading this, by the theologian Oliver O’Donovan, “ *Compassion is hardly a virtue that can stand by itself. Compassion is the virtue of being moved to action by the sight of suffering -- that is to say, by the infringement of passive freedoms. It is a virtue that circumvents thought, since it prompts us immediately to action. It is a virtue that presupposes that an answer has already been found to the question, 'What needs to be done?'*”

Those words lifted a great burden from my soul. I’m an activist leader, and I’m the priest to a congregation. Much of my work involves asking, and trying to answer, that question: *what needs to be done?* So perhaps it’s not that I lack compassion, but that I think – I have to think– before I act. And that may not be how some people perceive, or receive, compassion.

Years later, Jep remembered this great spiritual struggle of mine, and made the C.D. for me. To remind me that yes, I do have compassion, that yes, this is how he sees me.

I tell you this because I think most of us tend to sell ourselves short in the virtue department, the sainthood department. We are warned about the spiritual sin of pride, and that is a very dangerous sin indeed. But self-doubt or misguided humility can also cripple our souls. Most of us, all of us probably, do some ordinary thing extraordinarily well. All of us are fighting a great battle of one kind or another, and most of us are being kind to someone else who is fighting a great battle.

Most of us have had to *struggle and fight/ to keep understanding and compassion in sight*. We probably haven’t always succeeded. But we keep trying. That’s what Jesus calls us to do. That’s what draws us into sainthood. That’s what allows us to count ourselves, we pray, among *holy ones of the Most High (who) shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever—for ever and ever*.

Alleluia! Amen