

These days it is popular to criticize the Church, especially its history. And yet, despite its faults and failings, the Church still has some wonderful gifts to give us, if we are willing and open to receiving them. Today, when I talk about “The Church”, unless I specify, I do not mean this parish of Church of the Good Shepherd, nor do I mean the denomination to which we belong, The Episcopal Church. I mean the whole church, all denominations, and expressions of Christianity as it has evolved over its over 2000 years of existence. Including the Early Church, the group of people who gathered in the days after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension and committed themselves to following the Way of Love, the Way of Christ even before there was a formal institutional structure to support them.

One of the many gifts of the Church is the reminder that we who are gathered in person or online today are not the first people to worship God as Jesus told us to. We are part of an over 2000-year-old tradition of people of all colors, races, abilities, genders, ages, levels of education, socio-economic backgrounds, and sexualities. Today that gift is expressed by the Church calendar setting aside the liturgical season to celebrate All Saints.

All Saints Day was not a celebration of the Early Church. It didn’t show up on the Church Calendar until sometime in the 9th Century when Pope Gregory the Fourth learned about it from Christians in Ireland. Once it was accepted, All Saints became an important part of the Church Calendar. In the Episcopal Church and several other denominations, it is just as important as Christmas and Easter. Like those days, All Saints is a celebration that not only reminds us of our beliefs, it connects us to those beliefs.

Another gift of All Saints Day is it reminds us the Church is not a building, it is the people who keep showing up, however they can, for God and for each other. You might have noticed in the part of Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus we heard this morning he used the word saints to refer to the members of the church, the people he was writing to. Before the word “Christian” - a word that means *little Christ* - had been coined, the word Paul used to refer to all followers of Jesus was saints. It is a word that means holy one. It didn’t mean only the best, most pious, rule-following people, the word saints meant everyone.

Language evolves over the years. Today the word saint is associated with an extraordinarily pious or exceptionally good person, a sort of celebrity rock star of the Church who never makes mistakes or falters. But holy doesn’t mean better than

others, it just means set apart for God. Over the past 2000 years, the Church has lifted up certain saints for their struggles, sacrifices, and contributions. As someone said, they are people just like you and me but whose lives have been edited and it can be easy to forget they did not have perfect lives free of mistakes, struggles, conflict, disappointments, setbacks, or problems.

Father James Martin, a Jesuit priest who has some popularity in modern culture reminds us many of the saints we think of as inspirational figures had difficult lives. In the 13th century, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas' family threw him in jail to prevent him from joining a Dominican order because they were opposed to him joining that order. Beloved St. Francis of Assisi spent a great deal of his life battling chronic eye infections. In addition to his personal health issues, members of the order he started criticized him for making their rule of life too strict and impossible to follow. St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, was thrown into prison by the Inquisition because they were suspicious of how he prayed.

We sometimes don't realize those famous saints were not trying to be remembered for all time, nor were they striving for success that looked like getting a lot of people into church services and a lot of money into church budgets. Saints were focused on being faithful, not popular, so much so many saints we think of as exemplary tended to be hard on themselves for not doing enough, like Dorothy Day confessed in her personal journals.

A gift of All Saints Day is the reminder saints are not flawless. They are faithful. They keep showing up, even when they make a mistake, forget something, or when they don't like the priest, music, bishop, budget, a sermon, or a change. Sometimes saints are the people trying to get the institution to consider changes and the institution they love rejects them. Still, despite the rejection, they kept being faithful. Not because they are better than anyone else, but because they love God and their neighbors and keep hanging in there with them. Other saints aren't mentioned in books, or are remembered only by loved ones, and are just as important because they kept showing up however they could, and were faithful no matter struggles.

This is the heart of the message of Luke's Gospel today where we get to hear a bit of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. It's slightly different from Matthew's Gospel's Sermon on the Mountain. In Luke, Jesus does not deliver his sermon from a place above the people listening. Jesus was on the same level as the people. If you paid close attention to the Gospel today, perhaps you noticed a bit of the author's theme of reversal the world will experience when God's Kingdom is fully realized here on earth and how we can begin living that reversal right now. By doing impossible sounding things like loving our enemies instead of seeking vengeance. By giving

instead of hoarding. By praying for those who hate us. All behaviors that counter the accepted selfishness of a society that says this is all there is, so you better get yours and hold on before someone takes it away from you, with the life-giving, merciful love of God.

This doesn't mean letting people harm you or take advantage of you. You can embody the love of God with healthy boundaries. Such boundaries are one way to show respect, and respect is a form of love.

Of course, living counter culturally is never easy, and can feel isolating. That is why the gifts of All Saints Day are so important: they remind us we aren't alone in this life and never have been. When we were baptized, we were given the Holy Spirit, to empower and comfort us to live lives that are counter cultural and beautiful. Not easy. Probably not popular. Often messy. But still beautiful.

The Holy Spirit connects us to God through Jesus and to each other and to the saints who have gone before us, those we sometimes refer to in liturgy as all the company of heaven, or a great cloud of witnesses. This means a life of following Jesus is not a burden, it is a responsibility to God and to those who came before us and those who will come after us. This doesn't mean we can't ever change or adapt to changes. We have the examples of the saints before us to remind us, the Church continues from generation to generation because it does change, and it will again. Our responsibility to God and all the saints before and after us is to be faithful, just like them.

As part of our liturgy today we will read aloud the names of those who died this year. If you pay attention during the rest of the church year you might recognize there are other times these saints will be called into our midst; like when we give flowers for Christmas or Easter in memory of someone who has died. Or when someone gives a gift to the parish of something that will be used in liturgy or in our music programs, or in our ministries like the Covid Memorial. These gifts remind us, love remains and keeps us connected long after someone has died. It is another way we keep showing up for each other and for God.

These gifts can be a comfort anytime we find ourselves grieving the loss of someone we love. Or for other losses like when someone moves away or moves to a different department at work or moves to a different class at school, when a child or grandchild starts college or gets married. Even good change can have a shadow of sadness to it, which makes learning how to remember as a healthy part of grieving such a valuable gift, another one the Church gives us on All Saints Day.

Perhaps one of the reasons it is so popular to criticize the church's past is because it highlights how the church is not a building of immovable stone or cement, or a strict set of rules, but is a bunch of people who sometimes fail, make mistakes, who judge situations through the experiences they have and a perspective that is sometimes too small. Those imperfections do not mean the Church is irrevocably bad. They are part of how we remember being faithful means admitting when we were wrong, confessing our sin, doing the hard, counter cultural work of changing to try and help heal the divide harm caused, and striving to live better. An example of how the Church does this as an institution is the Episcopal Church is participating in the process to help return the remains of Indigenous children who died at schools the Church participated in that separated the children from their families and their culture to try and make them part of the Church. But what the Indigenous people have shown the Church is they can embrace both their culture and faith. This realization can inspire those of us who aren't Indigenous to deepen our spirituality and helps us all grow closer to God and to each other. It is going to be some long, slow work that will be painful at times, but it will be good work, and another gift of Church that helps us continue to be faithful by learning and growing.

A little closer to this parish, this year on All Saints Day some of us are still grieving the loss of the saints who have died or who have moved away. Undoubtedly some of us still feel sad, and that is okay. Perhaps the suitable gifts for us today are the reminders we aren't the first ones to live through times of loss, and we won't be the last, and the sadness we feel is part of the love of God connecting us to those saints. Remembering them and their faithfulness can help us find the inspiration to keep being faithful: to love each other and God, to be kind, to forgive, to love even our enemies, to pray, even for those we don't like, to be open to receive the love of God and let that love carry us, especially when we feel tired. And to celebrate, as best we can, that connection to the Church through all its saints, because we are in their company, and that makes us all saints too.