

## **For All the Saints**

By Ridgley Joyner

Ephesians 1:11-23

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther, a catholic monk at the time, nailed his 95 theses to the door of All Saint's Church in Wittenburg Germany. Luther was angered by the corruption of the catholic church at the time, particularly around the sale of indulgences—forgiveness of sins. This document—the 95 theses--was a list of all of Martin Luther's grievances—the first two being the guidepost of the protestant reformation. Luther writes that the Bible, not clergy, are the sole authority on matters of faith—and that faith alone, not good deeds assure salvation. Sola scriptura and sola fide. Scripture alone, faith alone.

This is believed to be the moment, the act that began the protestant reformation, and the birth of Protestantism. And the Sunday closest to this day is known as Reformation Sunday. Thanks to Luther, who wrote our first hymn this morning, there was inspiration for other reformed theologians like Knox, Zwingli, Calvin, Barth informing the foundation of the Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran churches and many more.<sup>1</sup>

Today may not feel any different than any other Sunday, but that is because the things that the reformation afforded us are things we often take for granted.

I have always found myself proud to be a Presbyterian. Admittedly, we can dance on the line of being more about our specific “brand” of Protestantism, but what I love so much about being presbyterian is the deep history and tradition. Our commitment to education, thoughtful and intentional theology. Anything we do, there is almost always a biblical and theological basis for it.

I was also born into it. As many of you know my great grandfather served his entire career as a presbyterian minister in the Philadelphia presbytery. When I first went to seminary, I spent hours one night couped up in the archives room going through minutes of years past in the 1900s of the presbytery. I remembering reading his name in the presbytery minutes in awe trying to piece

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<sup>1</sup> <https://guideposts.org/inspiring-stories/stories-of-faith-and-hope/9-things-you-should-know-about-the-reformation/>

together what was happening in 1948 among the saints of the Presbyterian Church.

When I first moved here, I drove down to the church he served most of his time in ministry on 69<sup>th</sup> street and woodland avenue. I parked and walked in the side door, it was a Sunday afternoon and the church was still “buzzing”. It was still a church, just not Woodland Ave Presbyterian church—God was still at work in this building, but this time through an immigrant community disciple of Christ church. The young man gave me a tour of the building. I had never been there, but my dad had lived almost every Sunday of this childhood in the nooks and crannies of this space. I face-timed my dad and he walked me through all the hiding spots he loved, and told stories of where he used to sit or what happened in the fellowship hall or what he learned in the Sunday School Room. A lot had changed, but what remained were the stained glass windows and the people that dedicated them. Saints of years past, still upholding the glory of God. The presbyterian church has changed a lot since that building was occupied by the congregation at Woodland Ave Presbyterian Church, but their impact, their work, laid the foundation for even me, the child of God that never set foot inside that church until 2017.

Over the years, I relished in this beginning that my parents gave me. My father’s family was predominately made up of cradle Presbyterians, my mother’s-- Lutheran with a bit of catholic sprinkled in. I found my home among the faithful saints of many denominations early. I find it fitting that Reformation Sunday always is around the same time as All Saints Sunday. Because who we are today, is thanks to the saints of years past.

When we sing hymns like “for all the saints” I remember standing in a pew as tall as me, looking up at my mom standing tall singing teary eyed “For all the saints, who from their labors rest...” almost as an affirmation to her grief. That those whom she loved, year after year were living a life with God. As I grew up and began to feel the sting of grief myself, I began to stand next to my mom, this time her height, and sing this same hymn every All Saints Day teary eyed together affirming that somehow...beyond time in a way we can’t quite completely understand, we had communion with the saints that live so closely to us in our hearts.

Since the fourth century, the church has been remembering saints and martyrs, dedicating a special day to them on the day of their death. By the middle of the church's first millennium, there were so many martyrs that All Saints' Day was established as November 1 in 837 CE by Pope Gregory IV as a way to honor all the saints, known and unknown.

For those of us in the reformed tradition, All Saints' Day has a slightly different focus. While we do give thanks for the saints and martyrs of years past, we also celebrate God's salvific work among all of the people of God. "Rather than putting saints on pedestals as holy people set apart in glory, we give glory to God for the ordinary, holy lives of the believers in this and every age."<sup>2</sup>

Today we will name the saints in our church family's life that have gone to live in eternal life this past year, but it is also a day in which we give thanks to God for *all* the saints in our lives. Rev. Robert Dunham writes "It is for some a moment of grief revisited, the marking of painful losses; but at the same time, it is a liturgy of gratitude, comfort and encouragement, as the church draws strength from its memory and from the reminders of God's goodness."<sup>3</sup>

On Wednesday a couple came up the back steps and were whispering. I had my door open, so I turned and greeted them not recognizing them as people who are members of our church family. Perhaps they are visitors, I thought. They weren't. They knew more about St. John's than I did. I love that—I love that I get to be a part of the story, but that all of you share the story and deep history of God at work in disciples for years before Patrick and I came into your midst.

Ruth and Dick Meisner greeted me, introduced themselves as long time members of St. John's who have since moved. They were married here in this sanctuary, and it was their anniversary. Here on these steps they made vows to one another before God and their friends and family, and Rev. Dr. Ernie Macmillan presided the service. Still smiling like newlyweds, they took me into the sanctuary and showed me "their pew" and glanced up at the stained glass window we reflected on during the postlude of so many pandemic YouTube worship services. Ruth sighed a sacred sigh. I loved this window.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/all-saints-day/>

<sup>3</sup> Feasting on the Word Year C Season after Pentecost pg 233

All I could think about was all the people who had come before my time here at St. John's. How, like the church in Ephesus in our scripture reading this morning, St. John's is built upon the foundation of the love of God and years and years of faithful saints seeking to love God and neighbor. I've always loved sitting in a quiet dark sanctuary for that reason. It is almost like you can feel the sacred.

The beauty of this church is that it is more than a building, the building itself is made up of a deep history of saints, beloved children of God who made their mark in this world to point to a future that is not their own—to point to a future in which their savior will gather us all as one in the arms of our creator.

Every space in this building is covered with the saints of years past. Down to the plaque in the MacMillan Room, the dedication of the Carriage House, the décor of the Kean Room, the framed photo of the good shepherd in the nursery. The bible we hold in our pews, the hymnals we sing with. We are all part of a story that started long before us. We are all saints. And while some remain, and I joyously listen to their stories of years past at St. John's, some have gone on before us.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians, that we are *all 'saints'*...not because of what we *do* but *who we are*. In the New Testament the word “saints” *hagioi* is the most commonly used title for *Christians*. It means “holy ones” and was used to describe followers of Jesus because they had been consecrated to God.

So often we get in our heads that the saints are people who we have known in our lives that are commendable—who have done great things and should be remembered—like mother Teresa and Martin Luther. But a day like today puts in to practice what Paul tells the church in Ephesus. The beauty of God's great love for us is that we have communion of saints—as ordinary and extraordinary children of God--because our sainthood's foundation is in God's great love for us and the lifesaving waters of baptism.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes that “Christians cannot try to become saints nor are saints heroes and heroines of faith. Instead, they are people like us who have been made more than we are by being engrafted into God's kingdom that is ruled by forgiveness and love.”

Last week we spoke of the lifesaving work of gratitude—and our scripture today is a letter of gratitude that Paul gives to God for this community of faith. He gives thanks to God for their love for one another. The foundation of the church in Ephesus was built upon the love of God and the work of the apostles and prophets that came before them.

Our scripture passage is just a small part of Paul’s letter, and here he is blessing them, praying for their wisdom and revelation—that they may come to understand the immense privilege it is to serve as saints—people who have inherited God’s grace and God’s glory. Paul prays that they would also come to understand all that it means to be *known* and *loved* by God—that *that* revelation will enlighten their hearts to the hope that God has called them to—an inheritance from the saints of years past, the saints of today, and the saints to come.

And the responsibility that accompanies this inheritance is to be in the business of hope. To see with the heart—to imagine the future God is preparing. We are all saints, my friends, and Paul tells us that the work of the saints, is hope.

Rev. Dunham writes that “As Christians we are shaped by more than our own experiences, we are shaped by our hopes, by the future into which we are living. Hope is best perceived with the eyes of the heart. Hope is best lived within the hopeful community, in the company of saints both living and departed.”<sup>4</sup>

A few years ago, liturgical theologian Jan Richardson lost her husband after a surgery with unexpected complications. A year after his death, she wrote about the kind of hope we are called to—she says--

*“Hope is not always comforting or comfortable. Hope asks us to open ourselves to what we do not know, to pray for illumination in this life, to imagine what is beyond our imagining, to bear what seems unbearable. It calls us to keep breathing when beloved lives have left us, to turn toward one another when we might prefer to turn away. Hope draws our eyes and hearts toward a more whole future but propels us also into the present, where Christ waits for us to work with him toward a more whole world now.”<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Feasting, pg 233.

<sup>5</sup> <https://pastorsings.com/2019/11/02/enduring-in-hope-sermon-for-all-saints-on-ephesians-111-23/>

The business of hope that we are called to is the kind that we find in the depths of our grief, but also the hope that points to a future that God is at work in—that we are invited to partake in by being a living light of all that we know and have been taught about God from the saints in our lives. The type of hope that sees that the God of the exodus, the god of the reformation, and the god of today is the same, steady and faithful. Doing a new thing in our midst, reforming us, shaping us to be people of hope. God’s glorious saints. Thanks be to God for those who have gone before us, and thanks be to God for the immense privilege it is to be in the business of hope. Hope that brings about freedom from injustice. Hope that brings sinners from all walks of life to a table of grace. Hope that breathes new life into what seems to be valley of dry bones. Hope that restores brokenness. Hope that heals. Hope that invigorates faithful action. Hope that unites people above time and place in the communion of saints. Hope that the darkness of death cannot quench. Thanks be to God.