

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**

**“God’s Love Turns All Sinners into All Saints” (Revelation 7:9-10)**

**November 1, 2020**

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

All Saints Sunday is one of my favorite Sunday’s of the year. On All Saints we are reminded that we are not individual Christians flying solo—“just me and Jesus against the world”—but rather part of God’s “one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” As we prayed in the collect for today we have been knit together by God “in one communion and fellowship” as part of “the communion of saints”, the ever growing multitude of redeemed sinners past and present—from elderly saints who have already gone to glory to brand new little toddler saints like the two young children who will be baptized here at Christ Church this afternoon.

On All Saints we are reminded how much God loves us, as we read in today’s passage from the First Letter of John: “See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are” (1 John 3:1). We are all children of God, which is why Jesus did not teach us to pray “My Father, who art in heaven” but “*Our* Father, who art in heaven.”

On All Saints we are reminded that although at times we may feel alone, we are actually not alone, but rather blessed not only with the presence of God but also the presence of all the saints. Scripture assures us “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1). Yes this “great cloud of witnesses” includes St. Peter and St. Mary and St. Paul and St. Mary Magdalene, and yes this “great cloud of witnesses” includes more recent saints like Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King, Jr.

But on All Saints we also thank God for all the “ordinary” saints—everyday, redeemed sinners, like you and me, who have touch our lives with the love of God, who make the love of God real. Who was the saint who brought you to church or invited you to church? Who is the saint who taught you Sunday school or Vacation Bible School? Who is the saint who somehow communicated to you that yes, God is real and yes, God loves you? Who are the saints who have ministered to you during this incredibly challenging year of 2020?

On All Saints I remember a coworker of my dad's named Ken who invited him to bring us to church when I was ten years old, and my high youth minister Jeff, who was so funny and such a gifted worship leader. I remember my college roommate D.C., my RA and my best friend, staying up into the night laughing and talking about life and God and a blonde named Steph whom I later married.

I remember priests like the Rev. Renny Scott who baptized me 41 years ago this month. I remember my first "boss" in ministry, the Rev. Phil Ashey at Church of the Apostles in Fairfax, Virginia and how patient he was as I began fulltime ministry and was so clueless. I remember Rev. David Duprey with whom I wrestled cattle in the foothills of the Big Horn Mountains in the Diocese of Wyoming, the joy of serving and cutting up with the Rev. Paul Walker and David Zahl at Christ Church in Charlottesville, the rich friendship with the Very Rev. Dr. Paul Zahl, and the equally rich friendship with the Rev. Peter Ingeman (and Happy too) here in Valdosta. Each of them has been such a wonderful blessing in my life.

I remember Bishop Edward Salmon of South Carolina, who took me to lunch at the Charleston Yacht Club when I was a lowly aspirant. I remember thinking "what am I doing here at the Charleston Yacht Club?" but he took me to lunch there because he thought I was worth it, and a couple years later ordained me. I remember Bishop Peter Lee of Virginia, the most dignified person I have ever met. Although the bishop of the largest diocese in the country, Bishop Lee always got back to me—if I called him, he always called back, if I wrote him, he always wrote back—I never forgot that. I remember the ministry of Bishop Scott Benhase even as both he and his wife Kelly battled cancer, and the gracious ministry and friendship of Bishop Frank Logue—and of course, Bishop Henry Louttit.

I remember the many saints here at Christ Church who have died in the past six-plus years I have been serving here—over fifty of them. Like you I miss them and remember the pews in which they always sat, and their life giving smiles and the rich conversations and prayers with them in their final days, and I thank God for them. And on All Saints I remember you, who have blessed me and my family and encouraged us and prayed for us and cared for us—who week in and week out show me what it looks like to receive God's grace in Jesus Christ and share that grace with one another and the world. You too have touched my life with the very real love of God—and on All Saints I thank God for you.

Who are the saints who have impacted your life with the love of God? Who are the saints who have been your best friends, always there for you and always have your back? Who are the saints who have been so patient with you when you have been the most clueless? Who are the saints who have taken you eat at expensive restaurants because they thought you were worth it? Who are the saints who when you reach out to them always respond, never leave you hanging? Who are the saints who have shown you what it looks like to live in the love of God and to die in the love of God?

In today's passage from Revelation John records a vision of heaven in which he caught a brief unforgettable glimpse of the innumerable "communion of saints", of the "great cloud of witnesses", of "all the saints who from their labors rest":

After this I, John, looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"  
(Revelation 7:9-10).

What an amazing and effusive passage! What a hopeful and hope-filled passage!

"A great multitude that no one could count"...that great multitude includes every single saint who has touched your life with the love of God and has died and gone to glory—every single saint who died as a baby or died even before they were born, every single saint who died when they were really young and still had their whole life ahead of them, every single saint who died unexpectedly, every single saint who died after prolonged suffering that seemed to go on and on because it did, and every single saint who died before you had the chance to tell them "thank you" or "I'm sorry" or "I love you."

You will have your chance to say all those things and more because when you die, when you go to glory, when you from your labors rest, you too will join this same great multitude in heaven because God's love is stronger than death, because Jesus is the Resurrection and the life, because as Christians we are resurrection people, because as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:52).

Moreover, in this “great multitude that no one could count” there is equally great diversity because God’s love encompasses those “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”—because God’s love is universal and unconditional and immeasurable and all-encompassing and all-inclusive and higher than the highest mountain and deeper than the deepest ocean, and never ever ends.

On Good Friday God demonstrated this love once and for all, because as scripture assures us, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Christ died us *not* while we were saints, but while we were sinners. Today’s passage from Revelation points to that—did you catch it?

The reason this great multitude could stand in heaven before the throne of our Savior Jesus Christ “with palm branches in their hands” is because on Palm Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem knowing what he would have to suffer, knowing that some of the same people who shouted, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna to the highest heaven!” (Matthew 21:9) just five days would shout. “Crucify, crucify him!” (Luke 23:21).

The reason this great multitude could stand before the throne of our Savior Jesus Christ “robed in white” was because they had been forgiven of all their sins and clothed with the righteousness of God, because God’s loving forgiveness is so pervasive, so complete that as God spoke through the Old Testament Isaiah, “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow” (Isaiah 1:18).

The reason this great multitude could stand before the throne of our Savior Jesus Christ crying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” is because it does—because God is a God who saves, because God is a God of salvation, because as Jesus himself said, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17), because as John the Baptist proclaimed Jesus in indeed “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Salvation indeed belongs to our God because God’s love turns all sinners into all saints.

And on this All Saints Sunday the good news of the gospel is that God’s love means the “great multitude that no one could count” includes...you.

Amen.