

Lessons of the Saints

By

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from the pulpit of
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All Saints

Psalm 78:1-4

¹Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. ²I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, ³things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. ⁴We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, ⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

To all God's beloved at Bryn Mawr today, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God. There is a sense in which heaven and earth touch one another on All Saints Sunday. Using the text of the Latin Mass for the saints who have died, the Duruflé Requiem sings of what we say we believe about the promises of heaven: *Give them eternal rest and let perpetual light shine upon them.* In beauty that transcends mere words, today's music transports our spirits to recall our loved ones in heaven, and to be assured of God's promises of rest and eternal peace.

This heavenly vision of the everlasting light of Christ then touches the earth through our scripture readings. Paul's opening salutation to the church at Rome reminds us of the role of the Saints for the community of faith, those who have died and those who live among us in the church. Whether living or dead, according to the Apostle Paul, the saints bear witness to the good and gracious promises of the living God. *Give ear to my teaching,* says the psalmist. *The things about God that our ancestors told us, we will tell to the coming generation... the wonders that God has done.*

Then the Apostle Paul carries this notion of the saints as teacher in his address to the church in Rome. He calls upon the recipients of his letter, *God's beloved who are called to be saints.* In *this* biblical tradition, a saint is not a saint because of having lived a perfect life. The saints are not saints necessarily because they have already died. There are earthly saints beside us. According to Paul, saints are those who are alive in the faith, showing us the way of Christ by example and by companionship. The saints already in heaven have given us the words, told us the stories, and taught us the tunes whereby we praise God, and by the light of their witness, we earthly saints grow in faith and commitment in order to be the church, the body of Christ.

I love the way Lutheran pastor Richard Lischer has written about the ordinary saints, the church members, to whom Paul wrote his letters and how we learn from them now. Richard Lischer writes: "The saints are our teachers. They are God's faculty. And here's what they teach: they teach the hardest subjects, the kind that, when you're honest with yourself you said, 'I could use a tutor.'" They specialize in the subjects of faith that even the most powerful and best

educated among us have not mastered and probably never will. They teach us how to forgive. They teach us how to say *no* to earthly power. They teach us always to tell the truth. They teach us to forget ourselves and serve others. But most of all,” Lischer concludes, “the saints teach us how to die.”¹ In teaching us how to die, they show us what life is all about, what has ultimate value, what to pay attention to, whom to love, what to hope for. They give those of us who still tread the earth a heavenly touch of God’s eternal light and peace.

We remember that in the Roman world of the New Testament era, the dead were buried outside the walls of the city in a place called a necropolis – a city of its own for the dead. Peter Brown tells us in his book *The Cult of the Saints*, that the church began something that was unthinkable in a pagan society. The early Christians began taking their bread and wine and holy books out into the cemeteries where the faithful were buried, and they started worshipping *with* them. Then they did something even more extraordinary. In the sixth century they began moving their dead inside the city walls and onto sacred ground where they could be nestled around the church. Some of them they even moved *inside* the church. Through the growth of the church, across the centuries, people of faith began to understand the dead, the dearly departed, as friends in the faith, invisible companions, our teachers.

As Richard Lischer says, because they are eternal, they are closer to God than us. Because they have died in faith and have been resurrected, the saints live in our memory and imagination. We remember them, and what they were like, the commitments they held dear, and the faith we shared, all of which provides little tutorials on how to live with hope amidst the challenges of our time.

So today, we honor all the saints. At the Communion Table, we recall those who have died, whose memory touches us from the realm of heaven with hope in the life to come, and those living saints who sit beside us faithfully populating the living of our days by their love and witness. Together, we embody the life we share in the Risen Christ. So to all of God’s beloved who

¹ Richard Lischer, “For All the Saints,” *Just Tell the Truth*, p. 164.

are called to be saints, may the heavenly vision of God's grace touch and bless our earthly journey with peace.

AMEN.