

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 2, 2008
All Saints Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Nehemiah 9:7-14
Psalm 149
Revelation 7:2-17
Matthew 5:1-12

Today is a special day in the life of the church. On this day, we remember those who have preceded us in the life of faith. We recall their lives as examples of courage and faithfulness, and we celebrate the heavenly hope to which they aspired.

In doing so, we find ourselves linked with them as sharers of a common destiny and hope. And, in the liturgy, we join our worship with their ongoing worship and praise around the throne of God, celebrating together the grace of God in our lives.

All Saints Day was a happy occasion for John Wesley as well. In his Journal entry for November 1, 1756, he writes: “November 1 was a day of triumphant joy, as All Saints Day generally is. How superstitious are they who scruple giving God thanks for the lives and deaths of his saints!”

All Saints was a joyous occasion for Wesley because he realized that through this time we encounter deeply and profoundly what it means to be the Church -- the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church which is one body in Jesus Christ. We are not “self made” Christians. We are not little “islands” unto

ourselves. Our lives are deeply and intimately linked together with those who've gone before whether we like to admit it or not. Without the sacrifices of those who have gone before us, many of us would not be here this morning.

For those who may be unfamiliar with All Saints or who have never celebrated it before, let me give you a brief history.

As the early church grew and believers died, the church sought a way to give thanks for the lives of martyrs and others who had died victoriously in the faith. In some churches where persons had been martyred, it was often customary to gather for a communion service at the martyr's tomb. The tomb was often used as a communion table!

Later, churches were sometimes built over these sites, beginning the practice of naming churches in honor of special saints.

All Saints was originally observed during the Easter season, probably in commemoration of the resurrection. But somewhere around 835 A.D., Pope Gregory moved the date to November 1. There may have been several factors behind this, but one in particular is worth noting today.

For centuries, the end of October and Halloween have commemorated the time of year when it was believed that the spirits of the dead returned to life again and caused havoc in the lives of others. As we know, all kinds of rituals

surrounding Halloween have developed. Some may be harmless, but others are actually full-blown celebrations of the occult and the powers of evil.

By moving All Saints to November 1, the Church issued a powerful witness and testimony to the triumph of good over evil, the Reign of God over the powers of darkness, and the defeat of the powers of death and hell by the power of God.

All Saints is joyous, then, and it is important to us because we are connected to those who have preceded us. As many of our hymns this morning remind us, we continue in their stead. We carry on their work and their testimony to the Kingdom of God and to its presence in the world.

We do this, of course, with the realization that those we remember were real human beings, as we are. They walked with feet of clay, as we do. They experienced failure, heartache, and disappointment, just as we do. They were sinners, like us.

But unimprovable perfection has never been a requirement for sainthood. Saints are people who definitely have feet of clay. But their example is still worth following. As Robert Louis Stevenson observed, “saints are sinners who keep on going.” And as one bishop from Sweden put it, “saints are those who make it easier for us to believe in God.”

William Willimon tells a story about when he was the chaplain at Duke University. One day a father brought his young son to the University Chapel for

the first time. They walked through the magnificent structure, taking their time moving up and down every aisle and looking at the beauty all around them.

As they looked closely at the stained glass windows, the father stopped and asked: “Son, do you know who the saints are?”

“Sure,” the little boy replied. “The saints are the people up there where the sun shines through.”

In a few moments, we will pause and remember and give thanks for the lives of many who have inspired us to follow Jesus. We do so with the awareness that they have passed the baton on to us. They are now at rest -- but we are still all in this together. They *began* the song of praise; it is now our turn to *continue* it.

Today we look backward as well as forward. And we pray for grace that we might live our lives as faithfully as they lived theirs; that we may love as deeply as they loved; that we may serve as enthusiastically as they served; that we may give as sacrificially as they gave.

And we look forward to the day when we join them around the throne of God, where we will sing the song of praise that never ends.

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