

Sunday, November 1, 2020
All Saints Day
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Bishop Suffragan and Ecclesiastical Authority

Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus said.

That blessing is powerful as Halloween, All Saints Day and the final countdown to Election Day all converge in one weekend.

Halloween predates Christianity by centuries. It descended from Samain Eve, which marked the completion of the Celtic year. On that night between the end of one year and the beginning of the next, the Celts believed that the veil between the natural and spirit worlds was so thin that malevolent beings could enter the physical world. That night treacherous, so Celts would light bonfires and disguise themselves as ghosts and demons so that real ghosts and demons would leave them alone.

When Christianity spread to the British Isles early in the fourth century, leaders of the Church tried to christianize the pagan religion. They renamed Samhain “All Hallows’ or All Saints’ Day” and called Samhain Eve, “All Hallows’ Eve.” By the 8th century, All Hallows’ Eve and All Saints’ Day were well established as a pair – and it is a good thing because the juxtaposition of Halloween and All Saints’ Day reminds us of who we are as human beings, who we are as Christians.

We are, as Halloween suggests, frightening creatures at times. Like the ghosts who prowl on Halloween night, we are capable of wickedness. We have the capacity to harm each other, our environment and ourselves, and to break relationship with God. We are sinners. We are, as Halloween reminds us, all too mortal, all too subject to death.

AND we are also, as All Saints’ Day proclaims, children of God who created and loves us. We are siblings of Christ who lived and died and rose again to lead us to the fulness of life. We are numbered among the countless saints of God who have lived and died before us, and who live forever in God’s eternal realm.

Halloween says we will die. All Saints’ Day says we will live forever. Put them together, and we see a whole truth about ourselves. We are sinners. And we are saints.

The Catechism at the back of our Book of Common Prayer says; “The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer and praise.”

We are SAINTS of God. We became saints at our baptism. This word “saint” appears 59 times in holy scripture – and every time it refers to those who are striving to live a faithful life following Jesus on this earth. St. Paul addresses some letters, “To all the saints living in” such and such a town. He instructs the people to pray for the saints, to give a portion of their wealth for the benefit of the saints, to greet the saints, to serve the saints. He uses the term saints for the living who follow Jesus on this earth. People like us. Not perfect people, not people who have it all together living exemplary lives, but people who are doing their best to follow Jesus’ way. We are saints of God on a journey of faith, no matter where we are on that journey.

It’s not that I am a saint and you are a saint, but that we together are the saints of God. The word saint, singular, is used only one time in the Bible. The 58 other times, it is plural. You can’t be a saint alone. No one can be a Christian in isolation. We need each other. We need the strength and challenge of others to lift us and prod us and keep us on the right path. We need a community in order to be saints of God.

And we have it in the communion of saints. I am in communion with people of past generations who could never have conceived of the idea of a woman bishop – and with Christians today who can’t conceive of a woman bishop. I am in communion with people who disagree passionately with the things that I hold most dear. We are in communion with people of every nation, every language, every political leaning, with sinners who are saints because they are striving to live follow Jesus. We are bound together with people in every place and time. It’s part of the deal we made when we were baptized. When we choose Jesus, we get each other. That doesn’t mean that we agree. God knows we don’t! Across time and space, across the passions of our hearts, we differ from one another. Yet we are connected. We saints and sinners are in the wonder and mess of this world together.

I can’t think of a time when we have needed the strength of the communion of saints more than we need it now. We are tired after months of living in a pandemic. We are weary knowing that COVID is spiking again and we will remain in this pandemic over Christmas and into next year. We are exhausted from months of being distanced from one another. Not only are we intentionally distanced because of the Coronavirus, we as a nation are divided in this election season that may well not be over at the end of the day on Tuesday. We are divided in responses to the legacy of racial injustice that has become visible in recent months to many who had not seen it quite so clearly before. We are polarized as we witness our civic leaders speak and act in ways that are not always civil, and as citizens follow suit.

And yet, we are one nation. We are bound together by our history, even though we interpret that history differently. We are bound together by the desire that most have to do our best for the benefit of all people, even when we have different images of best. We are bound to one another, like it or not, because our well being depends on the well being of all.

As sinners who are saints of God, we are called to pray for our nation. I invite us all to take part in the National Service for Healing and Wholeness with our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. It will be this afternoon, Sunday, at 4 p.m. at the Washington National Cathedral. You can take part at cathedral.org. And I invite us to continue in the Church-wide Novena, nine days of prayer for our nation that begin on October 27 and goes through November 4.

As sinners who are saints of God, we are called now to seek healing from the fear that feeds our polarization, to lay aside hatred that divides us more surely than our differences do, to let go of rage that plagues us so that we can move forward together into the next four years and beyond.

As sinners who are saints of God, we can commit to being instruments of God's peace in the days after the election. We can and must refuse to hate, disdain or ridicule those who voted differently from us. No matter how the election turns out, we can and must seek to understand those who voted differently. No matter who is elected, we can and must create opportunities to work with people with whom we disagree.

I pray that we will live as Christians in this nation in such a way that those who have no faith will notice and say, "those people have got something that I want." And so that future generations may look back at us and say, "We are glad to be in the communion of saints with them." May it be so. And may we do our part to make it so. Amen.