Grace Episcopal Church
All Saints Day
Rev Brian C Justice

Psalm 34.1-10, 22
Revelation 7.9-17
1 John 3.1-3
Matthew 5.1-12

All Saints Day

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints Day.

This holy day dates back to the 4th century when the Church remembered the martyrs of the faith.

In remembering the dead, the Church celebrates the non-duality of the living and the dead.
Because "if remembered, the dead maintain their ground and live among us" (Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 1).

The great truth of All Saints Day is that the living and the dead are not separate, but together. The living and the dead are not two, but one.
As we gather in this place on this day, "we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12.1).
Truly, we are surrounded by all of our loved ones.
We are – and we are in -- the communion of saints.

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And what is a saint, anyway?

Usually, we think of the saints as the shadowy figures of ancient history or the sun-lit figures in stained glass windows.

Distant people. Different people. People not like us.

But that's not true. That's not true at all.

In the Preface to the liturgical text called *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, the Episcopal Church defines the saints like this:

> What we celebrate in the lives of the saints is the presence of Christ expressing itself in and through particular lives lived in the midst of specific historical circumstances. In the saints we are not dealing primarily with absolutes of perfection but human lives, in all their diversity, open to the motions of the Holy Spirit. Many a holy life, when carefully examined, will reveal flaws or the bias of a particular moment in history or ecclesial perspective. It should encourage us to realize that the saints, like us, are first and foremost redeemed sinners in whom the risen Christ's words to St. Paul come to fulfillment, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

So, a saint is not a person whose life is perfect.
Thank God for that!

A saint is a person whose life reveals "the presence of Christ" ... "in the midst of specific historical circumstances." The Church, therefore, acknowledges that a saint is a human being whose life had "flaws" and whose life was subject to "the bias of a particular" cultural milieu.

A saint, we come to discover, is someone just like us. A messy person in a messy world.

I think the (occasionally Episcopalian) poet Mary Oliver captured something of this in the opening lines of "Wild Geese."

> You do not have to be good.
> You do not have to walk on your knees
> for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
> You only have to let the soft animal of your body
> love what it loves.

Loving the things of this world, a saint reveals "the presence of Christ" ... "in the midst of specific historical circumstances."

A saint, therefore, is a sacramental presence, like the water of Holy Baptism, like the bread and wine of Holy Eucharist.

In a saint, we meet the living God, body to body, spirit to spirit, love to love.

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What does "the presence of Christ" ... "in the midst of specific historical circumstances" really mean?

In the Gospel text appointed for this feast, Jesus shows us:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit ...
> Blessed are those who mourn ...
> Blessed are the meek ...
> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ...
> Blessed are the merciful ...
> Blessed are the pure in heart ...
> Blessed are the peacemakers ...

A saint is poor in spirit.
Vanity, greed, cruelty, dishonesty, selfishness, violence ... these are *so* expensive and a saint cannot afford them.
A saint mourns for the people that are hurt and the relationships that are broken.
A saint is meek and merciful and seeks righteousness and peace.
A saint strives to purify his or her own heart before judging others.

And so, with the real presence of Christ is his or her life, a saint changes the world.

But a saint does this, not with the ways of the world -- which always include violence, vulgarity, coercion, and deception -- but with the power of love, which is gentle and fierce at the same time.

A saint does with love what violence, vulgarity, coercion, and deception can never do: saint goes into a dark place and turns the light on.

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I look at you and all I see is light, all I see is love, all I see is a saint.
If you want to be.

Amen.