

## LET THE LIGHT SHINE THROUGH!

(11/06/11)

Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 12:1-2  
Romans 1:1-7  
John 14:15-21, 25-27

*“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, . . . to 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.” (Romans 1:1,7)*

*“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” (John 14:19-20)*

As you recall, last Sunday we celebrated Reformation Day. Wait a minute – we actually didn’t celebrate it since church was cancelled! So much for celebrating the birthday of Protestantism! Here we are today, on the Sunday following All Saints Day, which was this past Tuesday, and All Souls Day, which was this past Wednesday, two religious holidays that we Protestants commonly associate with Roman Catholicism or at least with the Episcopal branch of our ecclesiastical tradition.

We low church Protestants need to claim and to celebrate these two religious holidays, even if they are a little Catholic or at least high church Protestant. We need to remember that the Roman church is part of our heritage; we just branched off at the time of the Reformation. These two religious celebrations are important because they lead us to think about those who have gone before us, those who had a profound impact on the church, and those who had a profound impact on our lives.

Saints could be defined as those who experienced the kingdom of God within themselves, and who then made this eternal realm a living reality in their lives and in the world. In the words of our opening hymn, a saint is one for whom Christ Jesus is “their Rock, their Fortress, and their Might.” They are the ones whose path through the darkness is illumined by the one true Light. If we can move past the battle imagery, remembering that this hymn was written at the time of the Civil War, we can see that it is calling us to be saints as well.

The Roman church, more than the Protestant or Reformed church, emphasizes the importance of the communion of saints. As you know, a statement of belief in the communion of saints is included in the Apostles' Creed. This morning I would like us to think about the communion of saints, the fellowship of all those throughout history who have tried to be disciples of Jesus, who have tried to be disciples of the Way.

The basic attitude we should take toward those whom we regard as saints is that of gratitude. We can learn from their lives and from their struggles. They show us what it means to walk the path of the cross. The saints were exceptional people, exceptional Christians. They show us what is possible for human beings who live faith-filled lives. They remind us that miracles are possible. They assure us that our prayers can facilitate healing in or bring life to those who suffer physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

I believe there is an additional dimension to this matter of saints. I believe that the saints are not only historical individuals who did something special with their lives, they have incarnated and come to symbolize archetypal patterns of psychic energy within each and every one of us. This means that we have St. Theresa, the Little Flower, as a potentiality within us. St. Francis, St. Anthony, and St. Paul are psychic realities or potentialities within us. Another way of putting this is that the saints are still alive not only in the realm of God but also within us. If we have a relationship with them, if we are open to their guidance, they can help to show us the Way.

On All Souls' Day, Catholics pray for people who are in purgatory. A nun once told me how scrupulous she became about this practice. As a child she had been taught that our prayers shorten our loved ones' stay in purgatory. She was also told that you never know whether your prayer might be the one that brings about the person's release. Since she didn't want to leave a loved one in purgatory for another thousand years because she fell asleep, she tried to stay awake as long as she could to pray for these lost souls. Every morning she felt guilty for having fallen asleep.

The church seems to have a more than marginal propensity to take something meaningful and twist it into something that is psychologically unhealthy. Rather than throw out the baby with the bath water, however, we should try to return to the original intent. All Souls' Day is a day to pray for and talk to those who have gone on before us.

In the quiet of our communion service, let us think about those who have had a profound impact not only on the church and the world but also on our lives. It might be a parent or grandparent, a husband or wife, a friend or a child. Though they no longer walk this earth, they are alive in God's realm and also in our hearts. If we talk with them, and if we are very still, we may hear what they would say to us.

Using Paul's definition of saints, I think of my parents, my mother and father as saints. I not only received a lot of love and support; I not only received a religious and moral upbringing; I experienced God through them. But they were not my only experiences of the light of God shining through ordinary human beings into my life.

When I think back to my childhood, I remember a minister who reached out to my mother and me when my father was away in World War II. Reverend McElroy made sure we never went without. I remember my third-grade Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Anderson, who fed us Ritz crackers and stuck pictures of Jesus on a flannel graph board. Through her we came to feel that the church was a place where we belonged and where we were loved. I remember Reverend Rees, the pastor of the church I served as youth minister while I was in theological school. He taught me by word and example what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a pastor.

I am who I am today because of these people, because of the communion of saints who have been a part of my life. I know my mom and dad, Reverend McElroy, Reverend Rees, and Mrs. Anderson did not think of themselves as saints. They were ordinary people through whom I experienced the love and the light of God.

There is a story about a little girl who was visiting a beautiful cathedral with her aunt. It was late afternoon and the sun's rays were streaming through several stained glass windows that depicted the larger-than-life figures of several saints.

The little girl pointed to one of the figures that was illuminated by the rays of the afternoon sun and asked, "Who is that?" "That's Saint Peter," the aunt replied. Then pointing to another, the girl asked who that one was. "That's Saint John," was the reply. When the little girl pointed to another she was told, "That's Saint Mary Magdalene."

Then, with a sigh of satisfaction, the little girl said, "Well, now I know what a saint is. A saint is somebody the light shines through."

What a beautiful definition! God's light is within each and every one of us. It is the ground of our being. If we are truly transparent to God, as Jesus was, people will not only see, they will actually experience the light of God in us and through us. When people saw Jesus, who was an ordinary human being, they saw right through him to God. This is why Jesus could say, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father."

Most of us, however, are not quite as transparent to God as Jesus was. We get in the way. Our ego and our self-centeredness get in the way. Instead of being transparent, we become translucent. At times we actually become opaque. We prevent the light of God from shining forth not only in us but also through us.

The apostle Paul begins his letter to the members of the church at Rome with the following salutation:

*"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, . . . to 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."*

Note that Paul is speaking to the members of the church as if they either were saints or are called to be saints. His salutation challenges us to broaden our concept of sainthood, our understanding of what it means to be a saint. It challenges us to think not only of the great people in our religious tradition who have been officially

designated as saints, but to think of ourselves as saints. It challenges us to live our lives as saints, as someone who is transparent or at least translucent to the healing light of God.

I like that little girl's definition. A saint is someone that the light shines through. We are called to be saints. We are called to be for others what those special people whom we regard as saints were to us. We are called not only to be like St. Francis, Albert Schweitzer, and Mother Theresa, but also to be like those people who were ordinary everyday saints. When we become the saints we are called to be, the light of Christ shines forth both in us and through us.

In one way we can't see the saints who went before us; in another way we can, if we see through the eyes of faith. Jesus tells us,

*"In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." (John 14:19-20)*

I am in my Father. You are in me, and I am in you. Jesus is telling us that we are all connected with each other in the great Unity of God. He is telling us that we are not only connected with the great saints in the history of the church, but also those people, those loved ones, those saints who were an important part of our lives.

In the quiet of our communion service, let us enter into that realm of eternity that the church has described as the communion of saints. Let us be with those loved ones who have gone before us but who are still present in our lives. Let us also be in the presence of Him who fills us with his Spirit and who graces us with his presence, the one whom we know to be the Light of the World -- our Lord Jesus Christ.

*A communion meditation offered by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
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