

A Sermon for All Saints Day 2014
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Today we celebrate All Saints Day. It was actually yesterday, but it's one of those holidays on our church calendar that's important enough to move around if it doesn't fall on a Sunday so that we can all celebrate it together.

The old name for this feast was "All Hallows' Day," and you can't have missed that it was All Hallows' Eve on Friday, a name that we kind of mush up into the word "Halloween," which when I was a kid still had an apostrophe between the two Es to remind us about the V that we were leaving out.

Anyway, the whole rigmarole – All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day (which actually is today) and Halloween are all, ultimately, about remembering the saints.

How many of you know any saints personally?

When I was growing up, I was pretty sure I did. I had this idea that my grandmother was a saint. My grandmother was an extraordinarily kind woman; amazingly generous, and she always went to church. But she also lived in a wonderful house in the woods where everyone was always welcome. And she had a closet that always smelled like the apples she stored

there in the winter. And she always brought an apple cake made from those apples when she visited, because she knew it was my favorite.

But she was tough too, and she stood up to bullies and told the truth even when it was hard to do.

But my grandmother (Thelma was her name, and, believe it or not, my other grandmother's name was Louise) – would have protested greatly if I or anyone else had ever called her a saint. She would have said that she was not in the grave yet, and anyway she was just trying her best, and that she had her faults just the same as anybody.

You see, my grandmother believed, as many people do, that saints are perfect people, and that you don't get to be a saint until after you die.

But my grandmother was wrong about that on both counts.

Because, you see, a saint is anybody who loves God. In the Bible, when St. Paul talks about "the saints," he is talking about the church – his friends and family who are members of the community. Before the word "Christian" was invented, we called ourselves "the saints."

Over the years, for some reason we've tried to change the meaning of "the saints," and indeed the meaning of "the reign of God" that Jesus says is so near to us, so that now we think of the saints as dead, and the reign of God as a far away place we'll go when we die if we've been good.

But the truth is that the saints, the people who love God, are all around you right this very minute, and because of that, the reign of God is just as close to you. The saints who have died are with us too, and we will call on them by name to come rejoice with us later on in the service. Because, you see, we want to remind ourselves of what the whole family of God looks like, and to think too about everyone who will become part of the family of God in the future.

Jesus talks a little about what the whole family of God looks like in today's gospel reading. God's embrace, Jesus' says, (and I'm giving you a paraphrase of the Beatitudes that is faithful to the original version but might be a little less strange) includes those who have lost hope, and those who are without joy, the downtrodden, those who have yet to receive justice, the healers and restorers of the hopeless, the downtrodden and the oppressed, those whose love is not shared between God and worldly things but is given to God alone, those who work to mend the brokenness of the world, and those whose love for God and service to the world keep on even when the work is difficult, unappreciated, or makes enemies.

But if you didn't hear yourself in the list, don't worry. Jesus didn't mean it to be a comprehensive list, only to point out to his followers that God's love and embrace includes people who are not like us.

So today, as we celebrate the whole family of God, past present and future, use your imagination. Try to see that we all share our communion meal at one enormous table that stretches through time and space from this altar to every other table around which God's family is gathered today; to all those who will gather at this table and all those other tables in days to come; to all those who have gathered to share this one holy meal in the past all the way back to the table where Jesus himself ate and drank with his friends. All of those tables are really one table, and all who gather there are one family.

And today we're celebrating new members of God's family. We're going to welcome new saints into the church. Grant and Isabella Washabaugh and Stephanie Sauvage are going to be baptized today. We'll use water as a sign that they are holy, and that, in life and in death they belong to God. And we'll use scented oil as a sign that, like the rest of us, in the reign of God they are both royal and priests. And we will welcome them into our family, into the saints.

The famous children's hymn "I sing a song of the saints of God" says "They lived not only in ages past, there are hundreds of thousands still." And today,

we, the saints of God, are privileged to make that number “hundreds of thousands and three.”

But there are more still we need to welcome. Look around you and see who is missing. Who from our church community isn't here today? Who from among your friends and family do you wish most of all were sitting next to you right now? And what would it take to get them here?

And then think, for just a moment, about the people you aren't so sorry aren't here. The ones who irritate you or make you uncomfortable. The ones that you know you have hurt and can't bring yourself to face. The strangers you meet as you go through your life who scare you or annoy you or repel you. I'm going to ask the same question – what would it take to get them here?

Because you see, the family of God won't really be whole – that work of healing and restoring the broken world that Jesus says is so blessed won't be done until everyone is at the table, until everyone is part of the family into which we baptize Stephanie and Isabella and Grant today.

Amen.