

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
November 5, 2006

Revelation 21:1-6

Saints and Sinners

All Saint's Day—a time for remembering who we are by remembering those who came before us, a time for remembering God's promise to be with us, and a time for comforting those who grieve. It is also a time to remember that the communion of saints is about the past, the present and the future and for all of that we are grateful.

Mitch Finley in the book, *Whispers of Love*, writes this reflection—

The Christian doctrine of the communion of saints is simple, really.

All it says is that once you buy the farm you still live on the farm.

All it says is that those who have gone before us are still with us.

All it says is that past generations still count and must be taken into account.

In other words, we're all in this together. All of us.

Seems an apt description of what a community of faith is all about.

We're in this together...all of us.

When one rejoices, we all rejoice.

When one weeps, we all weep.

When one succeeds, we all succeed.

When one thirsts, we all thirst.

It is the example of the one we follow, Jesus the Christ, and that example is trustworthy and true.

If we had to choose between saint and sinner as a description of ourselves on this day, most of us would probably choose sinner. We find it difficult to conceive of ourselves as saints. Historically there are good reasons. In the first three hundred years of church history, a saint was someone who was killed for following the way of Jesus who came to be known as the Christ...the Messiah, the anointed one. These saints were the martyrs of the church, people who were killed because they claimed the name of Christ. St. Ignatius said that the "blood of the martyrs were the seeds of the church." To qualify for sainthood in the first three hundred years of church history, one had to be killed. Christians were killed by lions or burned at the stake in the Coliseum in Rome; that is how you became a saint.

Things changed in the year 313. In 313, Constantine became emperor of the Roman empire and being a Christian became a requirement for Roman citizenship.

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It wasn't that Constantine was so religious; he himself did not get baptized until he was on his deathbed but he was a smart emperor and he used Christianity to be the glue which held his empire together.

As the church evolved over the next centuries, it became the practice to canonize Christians of heroic virtue, making them saints of the church after they died. Chapels were built to honor these saints. People would go to the chapel, light a candle, and pray to that saint. Praying to the saints was important to medieval Roman Catholic religion for it was believed that the saints would act as mediators. For thirteen hundred years Christians prayed to the saints.

In the 1500's Martin Luther and other reformers said that people did not need a saint or priest to intercede; that each person could pray directly to God. In the years following the Reformation as the protestant faith expanded, sainthood was no longer tied to only Christians of heroic virtue, but referred to those Christians who had died and gone to be with God. Out of that understanding comes the ritual of "Totenfest" practiced in German congregations of evangelical and reformed traditions here in the United States, the heritage of St. John's evangelical roots.

In the Greek language of the New Testament, the word saint is never singular, it is always plural. There was no St. Luke or St. Matthew or St. John when the gospels were written down—sainthood came later. Paul writes in Ephesians, "To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus." Paul refers to the faithful followers of Jesus as saints.

The word saint comes from the word Sanctus which means holy. God is holy and because we are created in the image of God, we are called holy, not in the sense of being perfect, but as belonging to God. Biblically, saints are living people, living here and now. A saint is a person through whom the light of God shines. William Barclay said, "A saint is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God."

Who is a saint? We are. We are the living saints of God. We are God's holy people. Within each of us is the Godseed that already makes us special. The world needs all of our power and love and energy, and each of us has something to give. The trick is to find it and use it, to find it and give it away, so there will always be more. We can be lights for each other, and through each other we will see the way.

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On All Saints' Day, we remember those who were the light for us on our way. We go forth to light the way for someone else. The circle of life goes on and on, connecting our humanity to one another and to the God who created us all to be saints, the holy ones of God.

“Saintly” Quotes

Those who keep speaking about the sun while walking under a cloudy sky are messengers of hope, the true saints of our day.

Henri J. Nouwen in *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit*

The hero is one who kindles a great light in the world, who sets up blazing torches in the dark streets of life for men to see by. The saint is the man who walks through the dark paths of life for men to see by. The saint is the man who walks through the dark paths of the world, himself a light.

Felix Adler

Saints are persons who make it easier for others to believe in God.

Nathan Soderblom