



Ordinary Saints

1 John 3:1-3

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All Saints Sunday

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See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that's what we are. The reason the world doesn't know us is that it didn't know Christ. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.

What we do know is this: when Jesus Christ is revealed, we will be like Christ, for we will see Christ as Christ is. And all who have this hope in Christ purify themselves, just as Christ is pure.

According to the church bureaucrats in charge of such things, there are 5,039 official, authorized, certified, notarized saints. Surprisingly, there is no St. Brett, St. Erica, St. Sandra, St. Ruth, St. Chris – though there is a St. Christoper, and, most disappointingly, no St. Poppy. We could, however, have filled the platform with Plymouth people, who have official saints' names, beginning with St. Richard, who read the Beatitudes.

Plymouth has lots of members with saints' names. We have Aaron, Adam, Andrew, Angela, Anna, Anthony—Are you listening for your name?—Barbara, Benedict, Cecilia, Charles, Edith, Edward, Elizabeth, Emma, Felix, Francis, Gerald, Helena, Henry, James, John, Joseph, Julia, Katherine, Madeline, Malachy, Margaret, Maria, Martin, Mary, Michael, Narcissa, Nicholas, Paula, Peter, Philip, Robert, Stephen, Sylvester, Valerie, Vincent, Virginia, and William.

Sadly there are lots of great saints' names that we do not have. Next time you or someone you love is expecting, consider these underutilized monikers when choosing a name for your baby: Albinus, Bonaventure, Eusebius, Linus, Onesimus, Polycarp, and Vitalis—who you have to hope is the patron saint of barbers.

When the church came up with All Saints Day, it was not so that we would remember famous saints like St.

Valentine or St. Bernard—yes, there was one—but so that we would give thanks for the saints most people do not recognize as saints.

St. John believed the church is filled with saints. He writes a letter to a group of churches—all of which seem to have been dealing with conflict. He writes to church people like you and me and surprises them by saying, “You are nothing less than the daughters and sons of God”?

“See what love God has given us that we should be called children of God. That’s what we are. If we don’t feel like we’re God’s children, it’s because the world doesn’t treat us like God’s children, but we are God’s children now and will be God’s children forever. Exactly how all of this will happen is a mystery. The life that lies beyond death remains unknown, but whatever the future holds, God will hold us.”

We have different experiences of being our parents’ children. For some of us, it was not easy to feel cherished by our mother and father. But what John is saying is that our experience as our parents’ children is not as deep as the truth that we are God’s children. We will come home to our real home in God, the home we were always meant to one day know and enjoy, with all of God’s children.

On All Saints Sunday we ponder the good people in our lives. Carlyle Marney—who clearly did not live in Brooklyn—said that each one of us is a house: “There are different rooms in the house that is you. There’s a parlor where you welcome guests, a kitchen and dining room for eating, a bedroom where you sleep, a basement where you store your trash. The house also has a balcony and on that balcony are the people who’ve exerted positive and gracious influences in your life. They’re your balcony people. Walk outside and look up and see who’s up there on your balcony looking down at you. Wave to them. They’re your saints.”

This is the day we wave to the saints on our own particular balconies. The saints on my veranda include: Anne Smith, a

third grade teacher who acted like I was special; David Harbour, a little league baseball coach who acted like I was adequate; Audrey Wilsdon, a church secretary in Santiago, Chile, who thinks the church should be about love; Dan Freemyer, a minister who invites homeless people to stay in his guest room; Dan Bagby, a pastor who has all kind of scars from the church and keeps loving the church. I have a crowded balcony, and it is good to look up and wave to them. That is what All Saints Sunday is for.

You have known some of God's saints: saints who gave you help when you needed it, and let you keep your dignity while they helped you; teachers who prayed for you and taught you in Sunday school; generous people who gave money that supported churches that you needed; friends who said, "I think you might like our church. Why don't you come to Plymouth?"

In *A Touch of Wonder*, Arthur Gordon meets an old man who says he is a teacher. Gordon asks him what he teaches: "In the school catalog they call it English. But I like to think of it as a course in magic—in the mystery and magic of words. Words—just little black marks on paper. Just sounds in the empty air. But think of the power they have. They can make you laugh or cry, love or hate, fight or run away. They can heal or hurt." There are English teachers for whom words are magic, filled with mystery and power—saints whose love of words overflow into others' hearts and souls.

Some accountants decide to meet expectations, so they act like most accountants—afraid to move outside the world of numbers, taxes, and financial policies. But every once in a while you meet a tamer of numbers who keeps the numbers from frightening the other employees. Some accountants make the numbers the story of people working together. These saints make their place of work more human and more divine.

A camp director describes her job as memory maker: "I make memories for kids. In a world where good memories are

difficult to find, I create memories for children—memories that will live with them the rest of their lives.” You will not find memory maker on any list of occupations, but some saints refuse to be limited by expectations.

A manicurist says: “I don’t do nails. Doing nails is nothing more than putting stuff on the ends of women’s fingers and painting it. What I do is listen to women talk. I cry. I laugh. I share in their pain. And I talk, too. After all, the women can’t go anywhere. Their hands are stuck in front of me. In fact, if I have a customer who doesn’t like to talk, I suggest that she go somewhere else, because I don’t just do nails.” She is a saint with acrylic and polish, a friend, confidant, listener, counselor, and evangelist.

If you look at saints long and carefully enough you will suspect that the people the world says are important—millionaires, movie stars, and politicians—are not any more important to God than the people who cared for you: the kindergarten teacher who loved you one word at a time; the hospice nurse who cared for your mother when you could not be there; counselors who listen with hopefulness; writers who share a word of grace that you needed to read; friends you pray will be your friends forever; saints in the rank and file of everyday life who shaped, taught, and encouraged you, who understood you as you had never been understood before and seldom since. They stood up for you and walked beside you.

This day is for those ordinary saints: mothers and fathers who have been merciful; neighbors who have mourned because they are pure in heart; young people who have been peacemakers; old people who have hungered and thirsted for what is right; courageous people who have been persecuted for doing good; ordinary Christians who have been extraordinary. When we remember the saints in our lives we end up praying that God will make us more like the good in them, wiser through their gifts to us, and stronger through their faith in us.

We hear the saints whispering, “Enjoy the life God has given you. Do something out of the ordinary. Love God. Love what God loves. Love the world. Love someone who doesn’t deserve it. Care for the poor. Care for the rich. Keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open. Keep your heart open. Laugh and cry. Throw your arms around holy moments. Live deeply, abundantly, passionately. Be a saint.”

Most saints have not often been called saints, but the promise of this day is that heaven is waiting with a crowd of God’s children. In the Book of Revelation, John tells about his amazing vision of a family that is impossible to count, every nation, race, and language.

When the curtain is raised and the last act of the play is revealed, when the story is finally told, there will be a great multitude standing before the throne, a choir of people, musical, monotone, sons, daughters, friends, neighbors, old, young, reticent, talkative, motley, stylish, Catholic saints, Protestant sinners, Congregational preachers, dog lovers, cat people, barbers, poets, balcony builders, little league baseball coaches, movie stars, politicians, philanthropists, accountants, camp directors, manicurists, nurses, counselors, and teachers, all the children of God.

When we feel like we are alone, we need to remember that we are part of a family so large that no one can count them all. When we come to this church and remember the saints, when we come to this table, the distance between heaven and earth thins out, and we take our place in the family.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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