

Remembering the Dead; Remembering How to Live

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
All-Saints Sunday November 3, 2013

II Timothy 4: 6-8; Revelation 21: 1-6

Dean Campbell of Duke Divinity School recalls that when his daughter, Margaret, was very young, they bought his father a pipe in England. It was to be his special, surprise Christmas present. But when Margaret saw her grandfather a few weeks before Christmas, she said, "Hi Granddaddy, we are going to give you a pipe for Christmas!"

Campbell was horrified. Later he told Margaret, "You should not have told Granddaddy that we were going to give him a pipe as a present. It was supposed to be a surprise." Unfazed, Margaret replied, "Don't worry. By Christmas Granddaddy will have forgotten all about it." (that comes a bit too close to home!) It is easy to forget – to forget what is important, what really matters, to forget so many things. But the saints in our lives...the ones who fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith – the saints help us to remember.

A few nights ago I was invited to join other clergy in a vigil for Andy Lopez in Santa Rosa. I was asked in the morning and said I would attend. But when it was time to go, I was comfortable and warm in my home and didn't really want to go out again. But then I remembered a story about my sister, Sharon. Her daughter, Gracie, and my father were in the car together. As they crossed over a bridge, Gracie asked him, "Do homeless people live under that bridge?" "I don't know, maybe," he answered. Gracie said, "My mommy helps people like that." And she was right. Sharon, a woman of faith, was passionate about justice, fairness, about helping and serving the least of these. She gave up good job in large law firm in Minneapolis and moved back to Arizona, where, until she was too sick to work, she practiced poverty law, working long hours, making next to nothing, to give a voice to those who had no voice. "My mommy helps people like that." I remembered the story, I remembered my sister, and I grabbed my robe and went to the vigil. To this day she just will not allow me to pass by on the other side, because she never did. Some people can really get on your nerves when they take the words of Jesus seriously. She still helps me to remember what matters.

After Darryl and Alvin's wedding, I was talking with Edwin Wilson, our architect, in the new patio. People were outside, talking, laughing, eating, having good time. I nudged him and said, "Who knew this would be such a special gathering place?" "Yeah, imagine that," he said, with a smile on his face. And in that moment, I thought of Ed Bawden – the church member who did so much to oversee the building of Memorial Hall. It was his passion and he did not let us down. Ed was diagnosed with cancer and died not long before the completion of the building. In the end, a lot of finishing responsibilities went to a young architect in our church, Edwin Wilson. I haven't talked with Edwin about this, but as he designed Pilgrim Center and our new patio, I like to think that Ed was sitting on his shoulder, urging him on to make this new building something special. Which is exactly what he did. The saints help us to remember

All Saints Sunday – a day when we remember the saints in our lives, in our church; when we remember their witness and the many ways they helped to shape us. We honor the people we love who have died by remembering them, remembering the best about them, appreciating them. As we light candles later in the service, I suspect many of you will recall one aspect of a remembered loved one that touched you most – their courage, their compassion, their sense of humor, their joy of life, maybe even some weird, but memorable eccentricity that made them who they were. But is that all there is to this day?

The ancient Greek leader, Pericles, spoke of the presence of the dead among us – even in death they speak to us – when he declared in his famous funeral oration: “For the whole earth is the sepulcher of famous men. And their story is not graven only on stone over their native earth, but lives on far away, without visible symbol, woven into the stuff of other men’s lives.” That, I believe, is a significant thing to think about on this All Saints Sunday: Just how are the saints we have known and loved woven into the stuff of our lives? Could it be that in remembering the dead, again those who fought the good fight, we remember how to live? The thing about them that we miss so very much – again, I think of my sister’s great passion for justice - could we add a little of it to our life here and now?

A father took his son into a large cathedral on a bright sunny day. The sunshine shone through a number of beautiful stained glass windows. The father said to his little boy, “These windows show pictures of the saints. Do you know who the saints are?”

The child, looking up at the glowing windows, answered, “Yes, the saints are the ones who the sun shines through.”

And he was right. The saints are the ones who the Son shines through, people whose lives proclaim the truth of the Gospel of Christ. The great theologian Paul Tillich once said that the saint is a saint not because he/she is good, but because he/she is transparent for something that is more than himself or herself.” Being a means of grace, being the place in which the Holy Spirit makes its dwelling, being the transparent window through which the Son shines, is the vocation of, not just an exalted few, but of all of us. That is why shepherds are summoned to the manger, why unsuspecting women are summoned to the tomb on that first Easter morning, why fishermen and the most ordinary of people are summoned into the vanguard of the Jesus’ movement. It is through them, through us, that Christ is seen and known.

We had a wedding here eight days ago... We have had a lot of weddings here over the years. But I know, because of this one wedding, a number of non-church folk experienced and saw, perhaps for the first time, a concrete expression of the extravagant welcome and acceptance of Jesus Christ which we talk about all the time around here. Again, who knew? On that Saturday, many of you were saints; through you the light did shine, through you and your welcome there was an opening to the new creation, to that promised new heaven and new earth.

Yes, today we remember the saints of our lives and of the church. But again I challenge you to reflect on how you might bring something of their special qualities into the world today, how you might add a little of them to your life as you now seek to fight the good fight and faithfully run the race that is before you. For now you are the saints of God, the ones through whom the Son shines.

And so, on this All Saints Sunday, I give thanks to God for the saints, all of them, including each of you. It is no small achievement, whether one is in a hospital ward, a hardware store, an office cubicle or a school classroom, to live like a saint. Amid the cares and challenges of everyday life, somehow to keep your eyes fixed on the things of God, to reach out in compassion to others, to testify to God’s promised kingdom in the middle of all our little transitory kingdoms – this is no small spiritual achievement.

And it is my constant hope that here on Sunday you receive the gifts you need to keep at it. I hope that here you receive the encouragement, the equipment, the grace needed to keep on keeping on. For you might very well be the only word from the Lord that many people will ever hear. So go ahead, much like the saints who have gone before us, dare to be God’s word in a troubled, hurting, confused world. Speak that word. Embody it in all you do. For, indeed, the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.