

The Saints of God

All Saints' Day (C)

Written by Penny Duffy

November 6, 2022

*I sing a song of the saints of God,
patient and brave and true,
who toiled and fought and lived and died
for the Lord they loved and knew.
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
and one was a shepherdess on the green;
they were all of them saints of God, and I mean,
God helping to be one too.*

Good morning to each of you on this All Saints Day Sunday. Originally it was meant to commemorate those designated by the church as saints and martyrs, but as the lines I just read from Hymn 293 reminds us, the saints of God are right here among us.

Today is also a time to pause and reflect and honor the dead. In Episcopal churches we name and honor those in the parish who died the year before. But we can think of it as well as a time to honor *all* those we know who have died. All those friends, relatives, colleagues, acquaintances, beloved pets, all those saints of God. And take time to honor our own grief and loss as well.

It's thought that the date chosen for All Saints Day comes from a pre-Christian Celtic festival to honor the dead, held in early November as fall gives way to winter, when growth stops and hibernation begins. It was a date considered by those ancient Celts as a liminal or threshold time when the border between this world and the next is porous.

When someone close dies, a piece of us dies with them, and a piece of them lives on in us. When my ex-husband, father of my daughter, died last June, the image that came to me was of him saying how we needed to tell the new baby that she was the best baby in the whole wide world as often as possible. And so he did, in his soft British accent, every day of her infancy. Divorced some 35 years now, there came that image — him pouring out love in words she could not understand but the positive energy of which she absorbed in full. He was tapping into the creative love and life force that is God. And at the time of his death, 1,500 miles away, with that flash of a memory, so was I.

In today's Gospel, Jesus describes how to live that creative life force by what seems an impossible "to do" list, a list we might call "how to be a saint of God" — love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Turn the other cheek.

Is he asking us to be passive in the face of evil? No. What he's asking us to do is to affirm life over death by affirming God as the source of all life. God is not death. God is ever-lasting, ever-renewing *life*.

To be bound by the Old Testament's "an eye for an eye" is to cut ourselves off from God. That doesn't mean we don't strive for justice, that we don't hold people accountable or allow evil to flourish. What Jesus is saying is that to pour love out into the world, even on your enemies, is to contribute in no small measure to life itself. What Jesus is asking us to do is to be empathetic. Empathy is active, not passive. Positive not negative. Life-giving not life-taking.

When the comedian Stephen Colbert was ten years old, his father and two of his brothers died in an Eastern Airlines plane crash. In speaking about it, he has said that what comes from loss is "an awareness of other people's loss, which allows you to connect with that other person, which allows you to love more deeply and to understand what it's like to be a human being if it is true that all humans suffer."

The death of a loved one opens a deep, gaping wound. We want to close the wound, but efforts to close it shut us down, so that *we* are not living. To be alive without living is to be separate from God. To be in God is to be part of the great circle of life — life, death, rebirth. The Alpha and the Omega. The great I AM — not the great I Will Be or I Was, but I AM. Ongoing. Everlasting. An eternal present.

As the hymn reminds us, the saints of God

*... lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.*

What is Jesus's will? To move through this living world in *union* with it. To love more deeply. For God is connection. God is Oneness. God is life everlasting. The Celts had it right. Today the border is thin between us and those who have gone before us. But while the Celts were terrified of the spirit world, Jesus says, Follow me. If you follow me, follow my teachings, you will not be afraid, for yours is the kingdom of God. We may not be able to meet his standards every time, but by striving to do so, earnestly and authentically, we open ourselves to the life-giving force that is God, to the kingdom of God here on earth and in the great beyond where all those striving to be saints of God dwell.

Who are the saints of God, again? Well,

*You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea
For the saints of God are just folk like me—
And I mean to be one too.*

"And I mean to be one too."

Let Us Pray.

Today, in this threshold time when we open ourselves to all those who have gone before us, designated saints and saints known only to God, let us take those words to heart. Let us take those words *into* our hearts, let us open ourselves to loss and, through it, find communion with others who suffer, with those we love, with all of God's creation, and as Jesus teaches us, with those who have treated us poorly, and in that connection, foster the growth of a spring yet to come. Amen.

--Penny Duffy