

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
November 3, 2024 – All Saints' Sunday  
Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Today we celebrate All Saints' Sunday, a major feast day in the church calendar. Our banners and my stole are white, as they are on Easter. We sing hymns that honor the saints and pledge that we also want to be saints. We read the list of your loved ones who have died and add our prayers for others, silently or aloud. This is a perfect day to focus on what we call the "Communion of Saints," and I thought it might be helpful to speak to you about the Communion of Saints as we understand this in the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church.

But first, let's begin with a few words on the Anglican approach to life and death. I take these words from an excellent book published in 2000 by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, a book called "Faithful Living, Faithful Dying: Anglican Reflections on End of Life Care." The members of the church Task Force who wrote this book assert that "Faithful living calls us to cherish mortal human life as we know it... The call to cherish life is a steadfast hope that we hold in the face of the reality that eventually and inevitably we will die. ... [But] death is but a single event that is not itself the last word. At the heart of Christian faith is the Easter story of the Resurrection revealing that God does not abandon us at death, but raises us to new life." As St. Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Rome (8:38-39), "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Near the back of The Book of Common Prayer is a section called "An Outline of the Faith, commonly called the Catechism" (pages 844 to 862). This brief summary of the Church's teaching tells us that "the communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead ... bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise."

Two of the prayers we prayed today express and expand this teaching. The Collect for All Saints Day: "Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you," and a Prayer for a Saint also used as a Concluding Collect at the end of the Prayers of the People: "Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit you have made us one with your saints in heaven and on earth: Grant that in our earthly pilgrimage we may always be supported by this fellowship of love and prayer, and know ourselves to be surrounded by their witness to your power and mercy."

In the Foreword to a book that commemorates many people throughout the history of the church who have witnessed to Christ in their lives, a book called "Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints," former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Frank T. Griswold, wrote: "These courageous souls bore witness to Christ's death-defying love, in service, in holiness of life, and in challenge to existing practices and perspectives within both the Church and society. The men and women commemorated in the Calendar are not simply examples of faithfulness to inspire us: they are active in their love and prayer. They are companions in the Spirit able to support and encourage us as we seek to be faithful in our own day."

The Anglican understanding of the Communion of Saints teaches us that the people who have lived and died before us are more than good examples of Christian living who are beyond our reach and that we do not have to wait until we die to be in active communion with them. Our church teaches us that the saints – those well known and those known only to a few people and to God – are active participants in the lives of Christians who are still alive.

Our prayers suggest that the dead in Christ may help us while we live. Some people feel that love, support, and presence. For some this can be a powerful experience. It may also be an experience people are reluctant to share with others. We may feel “odd” if we reveal to others – even other Christians – that we feel the presence or the love and prayerful support of someone who has died. Such experiences are not shared by everyone and are generally not features of daily living, but our church honors the active fellowship and intercommunion of the living and the dead in the Body of Christ.

Our prayers express our understanding that saints’ lives are marked by “virtuous and godly living.” How are we to understand that? Today’s message from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, reiterated by Jesus in our Gospel lesson from Mark, suggests that it’s about love – love of God and love of neighbor. To be a saint you don’t have to be a martyr or live a celibate life in a monastery or convent or be a great figure in the history of the church. You can be an ordinary person who is trying to follow God’s commandments to love.

Our catechism also addresses the issue of heaven and hell. I quote: “What do we mean by heaven and hell? By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God; by hell, we mean eternal death in our rejection of God.” This teaching suggests that it is possible for a person to reject God forever. God has given us free will, and we are called to will what God wills, to cooperate with God and not to reject God and God’s way of love – if we want to be saints included in the Communion of Saints.

Do we have to be perfect in love? The catechism suggests that the answer is no. We are taught that we pray for the dead “because we still hold them in our love, and because we trust that in God’s presence those who have chosen to serve him will grow in his love, until they see him as he is.” I suspect – though I won’t know for sure until I die – that most of us will need to grow in love after we die, just as we need to grow in love before we die.

The day after All Saints Day, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, is called All Souls Day, the day when we commemorate All Faithful Departed. On this day the church remembers the “vast body of the faithful who, though no less members of the company of the redeemed, are unknown in the wider fellowship of the Church.” For us, that means the people we name today, our family and friends to whom we are bound in love.

Putting all this together, what can we conclude about the Communion of Saints and what might we be called to do? The Communion of Saints is the vast and ever-growing company of souls bound together by love in Christ. In some very real ways, death does not separate us from one another. There is a tie of prayer and of love among this company of people. How do we remain part of this community? Love, ever-growing love. Leading lives of love as we are taught to do by Jesus and by following the example of other faithful people.

By God’s grace, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and with the support of all faithful witnesses to the love of God in Christ, may each of us rejoice to be part of this vast Communion of Saints. Amen.