

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
November 1, 2015

Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Texts—Isaiah 25: 6-9, Revelation 21: 1-6a

Earlier this week, I was searching for a graphic for the front of today's bulletin. Something other than the rather cluttered and blurry one that we used last year. After checking some usual sources without success, I went to my old friend, Google. I typed the word "Saints" into its image browser, and, to my surprise, up came—logos for the New Orleans Saints and photos of carousing fans.

On my second try, I used "Saints of God." That was better. But I soon noticed something. There were either paintings or photos of the small group of apostles together with Jesus, single individuals--the canonized saints, or images like that on our bulletin, of throngs of people with faces that are not recognizable. And I decided to stick with the throng.

Why? Well, it brought to mind the "great cloud of witnesses" that the letter to the Hebrews tells us surrounds us. Witnesses through all generations present with us even today. In our Episcopal churches, some of us observe both the principle feast of All Saints Day on November 1 *and* the Commemoration of All Departed (or All Souls Day) on the 2nd. In those parishes, it is the "official" saints, those canonized or acknowledged by the tradition, those known through history and around the world, who are celebrated today. Tomorrow is for everyone else.

Other parishes, like our own, combine the two, remembering all of the "official" saints and also ones known to us who have been connected with our own lives. Those who we include in our prayers and who we honor with the ringing of chimes and lighting of candles. The whole throng. This is fitting, too, when we look at what "saint" means. The word is not reserved only for those who have martyred themselves or have performed especially great or heroic deeds. They are, of course, saints. And so, too, are all who have been baptized in Christ. You and me. The word "saint" comes from a Greek word meaning "holy ones" that itself is derived from a Hebrew word that means "set apart" for God's use. (David Lose,) That is what happens to us in baptism. We are consecrated, sealed, set apart. One of the prayers for Holy Baptism in our *Book of Common Prayer* gives thanks to God for "adopting us as your own children, for incorporating us into your holy Church, and for making us worthy to share in the inheritance of the saints in light..." (BCP 311). The community prays for the baptized, that they are kept in the faith and communion of the holy Church; that they are sent into the world in witness to God's love. (BCP 305-306) That is why All Saints Day is one of our main times for baptisms and for reaffirming our baptismal promises.

We all have been in beautiful churches where worshipers are surrounded by images of historic saints—in stained glass windows, carved from marble, or in side altars. Some of

these churches are named after one of these saints. Then, there is the chapel at one of the seminaries where I studied. The architecture is contemporary and simple. Its beauty comes from the juxtaposition of that simplicity with stunning stained glass windows. On each side of the nave are 9 windows, in vibrant reds and blues. Those on the right are devoted to famous ancient Christians, going all the way back to Jesus and his disciples—the apostles, church Fathers, even some biblical luminaries like Moses. On the left are more recent folk—the 16th century reformers, theologians, and even founders of the city of Evanston, where the seminary is located. This chapel was not named after a saint. It was not called “Chapel of the Saints,” or “Chapel of Famous People in Christian History,” but “Chapel of the Unnamed Faithful.” There were even more spirits present in that place than those painted on the glass. We were surrounded by all of those who had worshipped there through the years—the students and faculty, people of the community, plain old ordinary people like you and me.

That’s true in this place, too, don’t you think? It’s not just the beauty of this historic church, its Erben organ and baptismal font carried down the east coast, through the gulf, and up the Mississippi river that have stories to tell. Or the beautiful altar and windows given by well known 19th century Galenians. Or even the communion chalice made from members’ gold and jewels. It is not only in the more recent renovations done so carefully to preserve the churches character or the gifts of paraments and vestments donated by generous members. All of those pieces add to the sacredness of our worship, of course. Yet, there is even more.

Do you ever come into this nave and just sit and listen? Do you allow yourself to become viscerally aware of the presence of this cloud of witnesses—to feel surrounded by the saints of the church, marching through history, connecting with each other—and with us—in our shared heritage and faith. And, can you hear the voices of those who have worshiped here—in 1850 and 1950 and today. Voices praying. Voice singing. Hands extended in greetings of peace, hands that bake the communion bread and prepare the gift of wine.

I certainly felt all of this on Friday when we celebrated the life of one of our saints, Robert. Though the church was overflowing, there was still room for that cloud of others who had been celebrated in this place. And those in each of our hearts who have gone before us.

And did you notice? All three of the boys that we baptized at our font in August were present? Robert and Joan’s grandsons, Lynn’s grandson. A reminder of the whole Communion of Saints, past, present, and future—the circle of life and our own place in it. And a glimpse of what God has promised us—an ongoing and eternal connection with God and with our loved ones. We cannot know what that is like, except for the promises in our scripture. Isaiah’s words of prophecy: that feast of rich food and wine for all of God’s people; of God swallowing up death forever and wiping away the tears from all faces.

The vision recorded in Revelation of a new heaven and a new earth, of a holy city, where God’s home is among mortals. Where God will be our God and we will be God’s peoples, where God will wipe the tears from our eyes and where death will be no more. And where God, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, makes all things new.

In a few moments, we will reaffirm our baptismal promises. Then we will light our candles, ring our chimes, remembering those who have gone before. And we will gather at the table—the Communion of Saints gathered for the communion feast where we enact that Heavenly Banquet that awaits us. It is here that we have foretaste of *that* banquet while, in *this* bread and *this* cup the veil between heaven and earth becomes thin and we share in *this* feast, where together, in the company of the saints, we encounter our God.

As we reach out our hands for the life-giving bread, as we drink deeply of the cup of possibility, allow this blessing to penetrate your very soul. Savor this sacred moment and give thanks that you, too, and everyone around you, are the beloved saints of God. And go forth fed and renewed, to be used by God in the world. Amen.