

# **“For All the Saints” by Marjory Bankson**

**November 3, 2013**

## **The Feast of All Saints**

Today we celebrate All Saints Day, honoring the lives of people who have shown us the way to LIVE more fully and freely as part of God’s good creation.

In the Catholic Church, All Saints Day is November 1, and it commemorates all those who have attained a beatific vision of Heaven and certified as saints by the church. It is a national holiday in many historically Catholic countries. All Saints Day is preceded by All Hallows Eve, which was traditionally the time when the dead might be raised as spirits or ghosts. We have generally made this a Hallmark occasion for Halloween costumes and candy, but we can see remnants of the traditional meaning in skeletons and gravestones scattered throughout the city.

In the Catholic Church and many Anglican churches, November 2 is All Souls Day. It specifically commemorates the departed faithful who have not yet been purified and reached heaven as Christians. Those who celebrate All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day do so in the fundamental belief that there is a prayerful spiritual bond between those in heaven and the living.

In Mexico and some other South American countries, all three of these events are celebrated as the Day of the Dead. Some scholars trace the roots of this major holiday back to the Aztec Period, and many Latino communities in the U.S. continue to

embrace Halloween, All Saints Day and All Souls Day as an extended period for acknowledging the reality of death and remembering their ancestors.

In most Protestant churches, All Saints Day is celebrated on the first Sunday after November 1. We usually honor those who have died during the year and acknowledge them as saints and guiding spirits, but most of us here in this room don't think of ourselves as saints, or even saints-in-the-making. It's a word that smacks of special virtue and dedication, or never-ending sacrifice. No teenager and few adults would even want to be accused of being a saint.

Long ago, a friend handed me an old copy of *Faith At Work* magazine, saying that we might find some good ideas for small groups in it. Instead, I found an article by Elizabeth O'Connor, the writer who made Church of the Saviour famous, titled "What We Need is More Saints." In the article, she described the process of sainthood as a process of group spiritual formation. In 1963, she wrote:

*We are seeking to bring people into the Christian community and not just to affect them individually, but to bring them into the Christian community which can mature them and bring them to the point of ministry... We need to throw away the maps which we have used in the past, to know that we have capacities that we have not exercised. What happens to people under the stimulation of the Holy Spirit is that they discover that they have been living far beneath that of which they are capable.*

That was a very different understanding of church membership than I had growing up. We had mostly focused on good music, good behavior and volunteering for jobs that needed to be done around the church. Nobody talked about making ministers of us all.

Fast forward fifty years and look around. This is what

Elizabeth O'Connor was talking about – a community that is not so interested in your individual beliefs as it is in helping us to mature toward ministry, toward caring for our common life and our collective efforts to love this broken world. For us, it is God who makes us saints, simply by calling us into Christ's body, into the church. The rest of the story of our sainthood is up to us.

Every one of us who made a commitment to be a member of this body two weeks ago, on Recommitment Sunday, is a saint, or at least a saint-in-progress. We all promised to

*\*Nurture our relationship with God,*

*\*Care for creation,*

*\*Foster justice and care about the plight of poor people,*

*\*Be a peacemaker,*

*\*And respond to this invitation with joy as the grace of God gives us freedom to do that.*

In other words, you don't have to pretend to be joyful about these intentions if God's grace has NOT given you that sense of joy. As our recent benediction reminds us, "just keep doing it." And, as O'Connor promised, we will be changed in the process.

We will discover gifts we never claimed before. We will learn how to foster justice, be peacemakers and care for others in the process. That process begins in volunteer groups and classes in the School, and it deepens when you make a commitment to life in a mission group. Whatever call brings us together is where you are most likely to find sandpaper for your soul.

In our Gospel reading for today, Luke takes the Beattitudes and turns them into a litany of blessings and woes as a

prelude for the real message:

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God, but woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*

*Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled, but woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.*

*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh, but woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep...*

This refrain has a wonderful sense of karmic balance. Luke's Jesus seems to be telling us that God will ultimately even the score. But just when we are lulled into thinking God will make life fair in the end, Luke throws in a curve ball:

*But I say to you that listen...*

*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ... Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

In other words, don't wait for God to even up the score. It's up to us to love in situations that are NOT fair, NOT just, NOT caring. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" sounds simple, but it isn't – not when we are feeling rejected or abused. Our natural response is to fight back or flee to protect ourselves, to blame or shame others. It is an unnatural response that Jesus expects from his listeners. A creative response. Something at the edge of possibility. Becoming a saint requires a truly creative response, a new way of being.

Last week, John Morris preached about "The Image of the Invisible God," our theme for this season. He told us the story of how he stayed with a friend of his who was dying of AIDS, not because he felt competent and capable, but because he was called to be there. And because he kept a journal

through that terrible time, his notes became the new seeds of poetry for John. What he didn't say – but I can say because I have seen John over the intervening years – is that the invisible image of God has become more visible in John's life and in his poetry. And I suspect that we have been part of that story in many different encounters. That's what saints are for!

If Elizabeth O'Connor was right, our commitment to this community will help us discover capacities we didn't know were there. A mission group may help us see and know and confess the enemies that we carry inside. We may even learn to love the enemies that keep us small and scared, defensive and alone. We may indeed discover capacities for love and forgiveness that we never dreamed were hiding beneath the surface of our lives. The bad news is this: we grow our souls most frequently in a field of difficulty and challenge. Sometimes the best way to love someone is to say "No," not "Yes."

We may also discover strengths and gifts that were dormant. An example that we have all seen and heard recently is the call which Linda Nunnes-Schrag has embraced for the Othandweni orphanage in Winterveldt, South Africa. I'm also thinking about the creativity that Vince Shepherd has developed in cooking vegetarian meals for the School. Gifts emerge where people are taking steps TOGETHER toward becoming saints, here and now.

Here at Seekers, we also celebrate All Saints Day by adding tiles to the Memory Wall. Any member may request a tile for a close family member, even if they have not been part of our congregation. This year, we are adding three tiles to the Memory Wall: one for Dr. Ernest Teagle, Sarah's father, one for Jon McIntyre, Henry Teagle's godfather, and one for Bud Lantz, Judy's husband. We will remember them as part of the "communion of saints" surrounding this community. I hope you will add your prayers of thanks during coffee hour after

worship.

I also hope you will take the time to read the new pages in the Memory Book for Ernest Teagle and Jon McIntyre in the Skylight Room. And if you are interested in creating your own page for the book, please take a sheet home and add your own pictures and stories to the book.

In closing, I'd like to share a poem by Jan Richardson that Nancy Lawrence sent to me this week:

For those who walked with us this is a prayer.....

*(the text of this poem may be found at Jan Richardson's blog,  
The Painted Prayerbook,  
[http://paintedprayerbook.com/2013/10/29/for-those-who-walked-w  
ith-us/#.UnhZ4Y3ykto](http://paintedprayerbook.com/2013/10/29/for-those-who-walked-with-us/#.UnhZ4Y3ykto))*