

Reflection for November 1, 2020

Spiritual Evolution

Our ancestors in faith bequeath to us experiences of their faithful living; upon their lives our lives are built. Our living of the gospel makes us a part of this communion of saints, experiencing the fulfillment of God's reign even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.

May the peace of the Lord be with you always.

Let us pray:

Creator God, on this All Saints' Sunday, deepen our understanding of the bonds of faith that transcend time. Bind us together in the mystical company of the communion of saints, those in every age who speak your name and who walk your paths of holiness. Grant us grace to follow in the footsteps of those who have come before us, witnessing to your transformative love, so that we may be counted as everyday saints in your eternal reign. Amen.

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when Christ is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

I thank my God every time I remember you. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

The early Christians knew that their faith didn't come out of nowhere; it was their inheritance, passed on to them by those who had come before. Whenever a faithful member of the church died, the living would gather in the place where they died, or in the catacombs near where they lay buried, to remember their faith. Is there a similar ritual in our day? Terry Todd, a professor at Drew Theological School, writes

“The sidewalk and roadside memorials found so commonly across our shared landscapes remind us that with or without the church’s involvement, people will discover ways to remember the dead. Informal altars with candles, stuffed animals, personal effects, and handwritten messages bear witness to the seemingly universal need for liturgies and ritual objects that recognize and celebrate the ties that bind the living and the dead.”

Traditionally recognized as one of the church’s principal festivals, the observance of All Saints’ Day dates back to about the seventh century. The Latin Western church’s calendar had become so crowded with days to remember prophets, apostles, and martyrs that November 1 became a general feast day recognizing all the saints. Still later, November 2 became All Souls’ Day, a more somber day of prayers for all the faithful departed, not just the church’s canonized saints. Latin Christian practices associated with these days blended with indigenous traditions to become elaborate cultural observances in many parts of the world. At the time of the Reformation, many Protestants abandoned the church calendar as an unbiblical invention, and for centuries looked with suspicion at the liturgical practices of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day. In recent years more and more churches have begun to mark the Sunday after November 1 as All Saints’ Sunday, a conflation of the two older observances. (This year, All Saints falls on a Sunday.)

The communion of saints is the mystical idea that God’s people are knit together in a spiritual community that crosses the boundaries of life and death, time and eternity. In a very real sense, we are present to and with each other, participating together in God’s holiness as it flows through time and space. The sense of mystery at the heart of the communion of saints is conveyed in the reading from I John 3, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been

revealed.” This verse provides a reassuring description of “saints”: those who are “children of God.”

What does it mean to be the children of God? This designation is not our own achievement, but a gift of love from God. As Barbara Brown Taylor observes, “The saints were not commemorated for their goodness but, rather, their extravagant love of God.” It describes who we are; but it also provides us with a future goal, who we are to become. This is what the Irish priest, Diarmuid O’Murchu, refers to as our spiritual evolution. Whatever shape our future takes, it’s not just about me but about us—it’s about Christian community. The communal dimension of Christian hope is available not just in heaven, but also in *this* life through our participation in the mystery of the communion of saints. John’s vision in Revelation gives us a sense of the global diversity of the communion of saints, the living and the dead, a definitive rejection of the tribalism and ethnonationalism that plagues so much of the world today.

So, on today of all days, may we give thanks for those who have stepped into that unseen horizon of grace—who have shaped us into the people we are, who have loved us and failed us and everything in between, and who call us now to a life of hope, to a life of daring to believe that death and pain do not have the final word. As Brian Erickson, a Methodist pastor in Alabama, reminds us: “This means worshipping, even in the wreckage of this war-torn world. It means seeing what the world cannot see, that God has revealed a truth too precious to tell, that we are a family, all God’s children, and that one day we will sit together at a great feast.”

Rev. Bill Cantelon