

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Revelation 7: 9 – 17
1 John 3: 1 – 3

Ps. 34: 1 – 10, 22
Matthew 5: 1 – 12

*Does the road wind uphill to the very end?
Yes, to the very end.
Does the journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.*

This is 19th century Anglican poet, Christina Rossetti's, reflection on the Christian journey, but a more contemporary poet, Maya Angelou, agreed. Author of the wonderful book, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, Angelou spoke about how people would come up to her after a lecture or poetry reading and tell her that they are "Christians." "Already?" she asked. Because for her, as for Rossetti, the Christian journey is a life-long endeavor. For both of these women, "being a Christian" was not a status at which to arrive and then hold onto for evermore. They would both say that faith is constantly a work in progress, and quite often a struggle. Faith is dynamic, constantly changing, constantly challenging, constantly growing, or else it is not faith.

Today is, of course, All Saints Sunday, the Sunday following All Saints Day, which is November 1st. There are lots of special days on the Church calendar to remember particular saints. This book, *Holy Women, Holy Men*, is chock full of them. Major, or 'red-letter,' feast days for people like Mary, Mary Magdalene and the twelve disciples like Andrew, whose day is coming up on November 30th. And lots of feast days for lesser known or more contemporary folk, like Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, the Martyrs of Uganda, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. But since about the 3rd century, there has been a day on the calendar to remember all those saints, just like you and me, who don't have a page or a day on the big calendar.

There is an old Zen saying, "Before enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water; after enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water." Something like that could be said for everyone whom we remember today. We're not talking about people who made ecstatic utterances or who penned great works of theology or music, or who constructed grand cathedrals. We're talking about people like my Great-Uncle Bert, or your fifth grade teacher, or a co-worker with a listening ear, or Connie Ruhling, whom many folks here still remember. People who, most of the time, simply chopped wood and carried water for God. People who somehow 'infected us' with the Gospel by what they did and/or what they said, the way that they had – or have perhaps, if they are still with us – of being in this world. Everyday saints, who would probably think you were crazy if you dared tell them of their sainthood.

No one comes into this life as a Christian and no one comes to faith alone. There are always those who show us the way. Someone, or more likely a number of someones, have acted as guides for us; someone has been Christ to us along our journeys, bringing light or love or compassion or a cup of water into our lives. Enough to make us want to be like them, to have what they have. We are all sustained along the way, and will continue to be sustained, by people who are "salt and light" for Jesus in this world, perhaps despite their glaring imperfections or shortcomings or quiriness. This multitude of "little-s" saints - people we know or have known, people whose names are lost to history - are whom we celebrate today.

In a Forward Day by Day write-up several years ago, the author noted that “saint” referred to every baptized Christian: exemplary models for us such as the apostles and martyrs, or less than exemplary models (the backsliders, the foolish Galatians, the arguing Corinthians, etc.). And besides that, the communion of saints transcends our human limits of time and space, so it goes both forwards and backwards and includes all whom it has ever included and all whom it will ever include. Even us.

The word “saint” comes from at least the 13th century, from the Anglo-French *seint*, but originally from the Latin, *sanctus*, which means holy. “Holy” means to be set aside. Specifically, set aside for God and God’s purposes, which, as baptized Christians, we all are. At home, I have a small collection of terra cotta figures that stand 8 – 10” tall. They’re called *santons*, and are from the Provence region of France. “Santons” mean ‘holy ones.’ The figures are peasants and villagers, and the interesting thing about them is that they each carry something. That something is what they have to offer the Christ child. One carries a sickle and a sheaf of wheat with which to make bread. Another carries a bundle of lavender to help the child sleep well. Others carry wood for a fire, fish for food and wool to spin and weave for coverings. These villagers represent the ‘little-s’ saints that fill the world. They represent us. Part of our life-long journey is to figure out what it is that we carry and can offer as a gift to Christ.

The Communion of Saints then includes not only the famous and the not-so-famous, but also the infamous. Not only folks like Francis of Assisi and Mother Theresa, but also those awful Renaissance popes and Spanish inquisitors, the plundering Crusaders and the TV evangelists! All of the vain, narrow-minded, power-hungry, ambitious, careless, common ordinary rag-tag Christians that are, to borrow a phrase, more numerous than the stars, and whom only God can count. Even people whom we would be appalled to consider saints: murderers and child-abusers. God’s embrace is big enough for all of us and that cross on the forehead at baptism never washes off, no matter what.

And THAT, wrote the writer in FDxD, is the incredible joy of All Saints! “We do not scorn or refuse fellowship with the unworthy,” the writer said, “for they too are saints of God. While [those who appear] unworthy grieve the heart of God, they are not expelled from God’s embrace.” And thank God. “Because,” the writer continues, “in our honest moments, we recognize that we ourselves are among those unworthy saints. But today, we rejoice that we can stand among that great cloud of witnesses, everyone a sinner, and everyone redeemed and forgiven.”

It perhaps is a little daunting to think of ourselves as saints, because we tend to compare ourselves with the ones who have somehow made a remarkable difference in the world instead of the ones who are ‘salt and light’ or who ‘chop wood and carry water’ for Christ on a daily basis. Being a saint isn’t about striving for perfection, because if that’s the case, we will be consistently disappointed. And it isn’t about going around and being “nice” and spreading “sunshine” everywhere we go. C. S. Lewis wrote, “A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world and might even be more difficult to save.”

Living into being a saint is not about perfection or niceness, but about the process of becoming who God has called you or me to be. Years ago, I met a priest who always wore something purple. Whenever he was asked about it, he responded that it was the color of Advent, of waiting and preparing, of becoming, and that he was perpetually in the process of becoming. We are called, each with our own gifts, to become vital, involved members of this community, the Body of Christ. And we’re called to face two directions at once. On the one hand, we are to have our whole being turned to God in

faith. And on the other hand, we are to have our whole being also turned, ready to serve our fellow neighbor in God's love. Living into being a saint is about discovering what our particular, God-infused passion and gifts are to be used for in making a difference in this world, in the context we've been given. What do we carry to offer to Christ? Living into being a saint is about learning to value that which God values and which the world probably says is useless. Finally, living into being a saint is about recognizing that what makes us holy is God. God's presence in us, and not our own behavior, our achievements or our piety. Because we are not going to arrive at the end of our journey before the end of our lives. Happy All Saints to all the saints of Trinity, past, present and those yet to be! +