

All Saints Day Nov. 1, 2009

Saints: People Who Make a Difference for God

A Sunday school teacher asked her students, "What is a saint?" One little girl replied, "Someone who lets the light shine through." Puzzled the teacher asked her to explain. The little girl pointed to the stained glass windows with images of St. Peter, St. John, and others. "See," she said, "They let the light shine through."

#### *Background of All Saints Day*

Today is All Saints Day - a day in the church's calendar that has been celebrated around the year 800. This week I received a letter from my Mom's church. In it the pastor said, "We will be reading the name of your loved one on Sunday, Nov. 1...we do not forget those who have gone before not only by reading their name on All Saints Sunday but by being faithful disciples and carrying on Christ's work just as your loved one did. We also read their names to remind ourselves that when we worship, we worship with all those who have gone before us."

Nearly everyone knows about Halloween. Halloween comes from "Hallows' Eve," the evening before All Saints' Day, or All Hallows' Day. "Hallow" is an old English word for holy or saint - as in "hallow-ed be Thy name." All Saints' Day has been celebrated in Europe and America on November 1 for over 1000 years. It is a day to thank God for the brave souls who paved the way for us and passed the Gospel down to us. All Saints Day remembers and celebrates the lives of the saints of Christian history and saintly souls that have touched and blessed our lives. Think of the many people whose godly lives touched and nurtured your faith in Jesus Christ. I'll bet that in the majority of cases those folks were strong supporters of their church through their time, money, and prayers.

It was John Wesley's favorite Christian holy day. In his journal he wrote, "1756, November 1, was a day of triumphant joy, as All Saints' Day generally is. How superstitious are they who scruple giving God solemn thanks for the lives and deaths of His saints!" And again, "1767, November 1. being All Saints' Day (a Festival I dearly love) . . ." <sup>1</sup> It is no surprise then, that cherishing church history and tradition we Methodists still celebrate this special day.

In the early church ordinary folks who lived genuine Christian lives were recognized in local congregations. We hope that becoming a saint is not simply synonymous with dying as a church member. Methodism has always had an emphasis on church membership being a committed state, rightly related to Jesus Christ as Savior, and seeking a life of holiness, going on to perfection. As a *living* member of the body of Christ each member makes a difference.

#### *Not Just for Stained Glass*

When it comes to recognizing saints, many think of the elaborate process of the Roman Catholic Church to officially pronounce someone a saint. Yet according to Holy Scripture, you and I are called to be saints, or at least saints in the making. The term "saint" is not something we made up; it comes directly from the Bible.<sup>2</sup> One person's definition of a saint: a dead sinner revised and edited.<sup>3</sup> The Bible tells

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<sup>1</sup>John Henry Overton (1835-1903), *John Wesley, Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. / The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1891, 39.*

<sup>2</sup>Psalm 116:15; Romans 8:27; Ephesians 1:18; 6:18; Revelation 5:8; 19:8.

<sup>3</sup>Ambrose Bierce

us that a saint is a *living sinner being* revised and edited (in this lifetime).

"For every St. Francis of Assisi or St. Rose of Lima there are thousands of unknown and long-forgotten mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors, coworkers, nurses, teachers, manual laborers and other individuals in various occupations who lived holy lives consistent with the values of the gospel of Jesus Christ..."<sup>4</sup>

They come from all walks of life, all nations, all races, cultures, and languages. "From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: Alleluia, Alleluia!" There is no affirmative action plan or multi-cultural program for heaven. Jesus has sent his disciples to *all* the nations; and from all races and cultures will come the saintly procession into the new holy city to dwell with God - all of us together singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Author Frederick Buechner says, "Saints are not made of plaster and platitudes and moral perfection, but of human flesh. They have rough edges and blind spots just like all the rest of us. But, their lives are transparent to something so extra-ordinary that, ever so often, it stops us dead in our tracks." Saints are ordinary people who let the light of Christ shine through their lives. "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

#### *Saints in the Making, Making a Difference*

Wesley fostered a movement of ordinary Christians, later called "Methodists," who would do extraordinary things for God. They aimed to "spread Scriptural holiness across the land." He simply emphasized living the Christian life, not just by "professionals" like priests and pastors, but by all those who have come to Christ. They made a difference by making themselves available to God - remaining steadfast, committed, and united.

Generally speaking we do not need the grace of God to stand crises and hardships in our lives. Human nature and pride are sufficient, we can face the strain magnificently; but it does require the supernatural grace of God to live twenty-four hours in every day as a saint, to go through drudgery as a disciple, to live an ordinary, unobserved, ignored existence as a disciple of Jesus. Celebrity status gets the attention in our pop culture, in politics, even in some church circles, and so we think that we have to do exceptional things for God. But it is not so. Rather, Christ invites us to follow Him and to be exceptional in the ordinary things, to be holy in mean streets, among people of all beliefs and from all walks in life. This is not learned in an instant, but through a lifetime of spiritual formation.<sup>5</sup>

Saints are those Christians who simply do what God has asked them to do - sometimes in the most mundane of circumstances. Someone once said, "Sainthood emerges when you can listen to someone's tale of woe and not respond with a description of your own."<sup>6</sup>

Saints-in-the-making are faithful to Christ through everyday drudgery. And sometimes it is a battle. Then we turn again to the vision we carry in our hearts, of a new heaven and new earth where the One seated on the throne will say "See I am making all things new," (Rev. 21). We can

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<sup>4</sup>Richard McBrien, "Who Needs Canonization When There Are Saints in the 'Hood'?", *National Catholic Review*, Oct. 28, 1994, 2.

<sup>5</sup>Oswald Chambers, "October 21," *My Utmost for His Highest*, Welch Publishing Co. Ontario, Canada.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew V. Mason

live a life devoted to Christ because we know how the story ends. He has said, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." We know who wins! When the economy is down, life is tough, health fails, problems overwhelm, believers backslide, and others scoff at Christ, we have hope in the Lord - not our bank accounts, not our governments, not our circumstances. The hymn reminds, "... when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong."

As we come to Holy Communion today, remember that "We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) - our Christian forebears, whom we have loved long since and lost for a little while, watch us over the battlements of Heaven. This is the communion of saints. They pray for us and encourage us, even now, as they live in God's nearer presence.

Ours is to build on the foundation they have laid furthering the spiritual legacy they left us. We worship each week in a church building we did not build, while we build for future generations of believers. Together: steadfast, committed and united in Christ, through the generations, we can make a difference for God. (St. Paul said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.")

There's another song in our hymnal about saints. It has a verse that goes like this, "They lived not only in ages past; there are hundreds of thousands still. The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will. You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store, in church, by the sea, in the house next door; they are saints of God, whether rich or poor, and I mean to be one too."

The field for saints-in-the-making is still wide open for all of us here at First Church. What you do - every dollar you give, every hour of service, every prayer lifted up - makes a big difference.

God is counting on saints like you and me to make the difference.