

November 7, 2021

*“All Saints Sunday”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Hebrews 12:1-2; Revelation 21:1,3-4

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

As you heard, today we celebrate All Saints Sunday. Now, throughout Christendom, All Saints Day is celebrated on November 1<sup>st</sup> of each year. But many churches have designated the Sunday immediately following as All Saints Sunday where, like we did today, the names of church members and their families who have entered God’s kingdom over the past year are called out and remembered as saints, that cloud of witnesses as we heard in today's scripture. It's also an appropriate time for us to remember all those individuals over the years who have helped shape us, and molded our faith and our character and our lives. Our parents, our friends, our teachers, our fellow Christians – those who live on in our hearts and minds, and whose memories light our path and help guide us through this life. (Pause)

Now, while we remember and honor those loved ones as saints, I think it might be hard for us to think that one day we may be the ones honored and remembered as a saint. How does that title sound? St. Orville, St. Aline, St. Jim ...? Sounds a little unnerving doesn't it? It somehow suggests perfection, virtue and sacrifice. In the Roman Catholic tradition, there are over 10,000 Saints, individuals like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. (Mother) Teresa, and many, many, more. Individuals who have been hailed as holy and to whom miracles and mighty works are attached. Their images are painted or etched in stained-glass. But you and I – well, we may think we can't measure up to what they did. Oh... but let me tell you something: the truth is, that all who claim Jesus as Lord of their lives, who seek to do his will and work in this world, are indeed saints by calling. We just need to keep our eyes on Jesus, the one who perfects our faith.

So let's talk a little bit more about the saints and All Saints Day. In the early years of Christianity, the Roman Empire persecuted Christians, and literally thousands became martyrs and willingly died for the Christian faith. Imagine that! But in 323 AD, the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. And the church wanted to remember those saints who had died by setting aside special days to honor them. But obviously, there were more saints than days of the year. So in 607, Emperor Phocas Augustus gave Pope Boniface IV the Pantheon in Rome, which had been a pagan temple. The Pope removed the statues of Jupiter and all the other pagan gods and consecrated the Pantheon to “all the saints.” The bones and relics of many of the martyrs were taken from the catacombs and other graves and placed in the rededicated Pantheon church. In more modern times, the Book of

Common Payer says that All Saints Day stands for the unity of Christians of all ages, countries, and races in Christ, and the perfection of that unity in heaven. And so it is today we honor that great cloud of witnesses to our Christian faith.

Now when it comes to veneration of the saints, John Wesley cautioned us Methodists against holding any one particular saint in too high a regard. Yet I think you'll find this story about a previously unknown saint as somewhat interesting and encouraging as well. Her name is St. Corona. You heard me right. In fact, the headline on a popular Catholic website read, "Yes, there is actually a St. Corona!" The story goes on to claim that St. Corona "is now considered one of the patron saints of pandemics." Ironically, her remains are buried in Northern Italy, at the epicenter of Europe's worst outbreak of the disease. For Catholic believers, this is more than coincidence. It seems almost an extraordinary happenstance that a virus goes from China to northern Italy, where St. Corona is buried. Now St. Corona was an early Christian martyr allegedly killed by the Romans because she was consoling a Christian man who was being tortured, and then professed her own faith before them. As she was dying she had a vision of two crowns descending from the sky, one for herself and one for her fellow Christian. Hence the name Corona, which means "crown" in Latin. And the coronavirus... got its name from the crown-like spikes on the surface of the virus. Now, because of her name, St. Corona has been a hot topic on social networks and media across the globe. She's become the go-to saint for protection against the virus. John Boyle, chairman of Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, said, "I never heard of St. Corona until today. But it doesn't surprise me that there's a saint who's been languishing for years. It's like finding a long lost uncle that you've never met." That she has been rediscovered after centuries of obscurity is a sign that the world is searching for hope and healing during these troubling times. I think many people are looking for something stable, secure, and enduring. St. Corona provides that kind of example. Look at how she behaved when faced with a life-or-death situation. She offered consolation to a suffering man and stood strong in her faith. And just think – in this crisis, do we go out and buy as much toilet paper as we can — or do we look after others, and show love and compassion for one another? If St. Corona can help us think and live differently, let's praise her, and let us now be the ones who live to inspire others. For the truth is, we will someday be part of that cloud of witnesses.

So let's think more about that. Because for me, there are two matters that come to mind. The first is that all of us will have to come to terms with our own death. And death is the number one thing people fear. Many people don't even want to talk about it. But as Christians, why should that be? As the Rev. William Sloane Coffin says, "Here on earth we have no everlasting city. But we seek one that is to

come, beyond history and beyond death. We are only sojourners in this life. Our citizenship is in heaven. Jesus promised us that the blind shall receive their sight and the lame shall walk, and the homeless shall live in many mansions. And it may be, yes, it just may be, that the reason our Lord Jesus Christ wept when he brought back Lazarus from the dead was because he knew from what joys in heaven Lazarus would have to be returning." He writes, "Death cannot be the enemy if it's death that brings us to life. Just as without leaving there can be no arrival, without growing old there can be no growing up, without despair no reason for hope. Therefore let us thank our Creator God that he has planned things so well, that all mortal flesh is only like the grass." You see, what Coffin is inferring is that, as a Christian, the worst that can possibly happen to you... has already happened. I like that! As a Christian, the worst that can possibly happen to you, has already happened. You must encounter and live out life here on earth. But after this life has ended, death takes us into that glorious eternal life. A place where, we heard today, there is no more crying, no more mourning, no more pain. Where all things are made new and everlasting. Yes, the prize of God's heavenly kingdom awaits us.

Now the second concern many of us might have when we talk about the prize of the heavenly kingdom has to do with the question, will I be there? Will I be one of those who will be in, or one of those who will be out? For Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Even the apostles asked Jesus the question, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" And I love the way John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace* puts it. He says, "If I ever get to heaven I expect I'll see three wonders there. First, to meet many I had expected not to see there. Second, to miss the many others I thought might be there. And third, the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there." But as we consider this, in the end, isn't that a choice of our own making. As Bishop Robert Barron writes, "The doctrine concerning heaven and hell is a corollary of two fundamental truths. Namely, that God is love and that we are free. Love, desiring good for all people, is all that God is. He doesn't go in and out of love. He doesn't change his mind. He's not loving to some and not to others. In the words of Jesus, he is indeed like the sun that shines on the good and bad alike. No act of ours can possibly make him stop loving us. However, we are free. We are not God's puppets, and hence we can say yes or we can say no to his love. If we turn toward his light, we open up like a flower and live. If we turn toward the darkness, we truly die."

So praise be to God for his love, for the cloud of witnesses that surround us, and for the heavenly prize that awaits us. Amen!