

November 5, 2023
All Saints' Sunday
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An Abundance of Saints

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Matthew 23:1-12

There is a common expression that can be adapted and applied to many moments of life. It goes like this: 'There is no operating manual for...'. Feel free to fill in the blank. I hear it most when it comes to parenting and raising children. Though, truth be told, there are piles of books on how to parent and raise children these days. It might also apply to other situations we find ourselves in -- juggling responsibilities, learning a new job, dealing with conflict, moving into a new town or city, caring for aging loved ones, and just keeping our heads above water in a world that is changing at a clip pace. There're no operating instructions...

Over the years I've found myself in places where I thought it would have been nice to have a set of instructions to refer to. But then again, maybe the way forward cannot be found so easily.

A wise priest once shared with me, after reflecting on his many years of ministry in parishes with what he had learned in seminary decades before, that when we was starting out, he thought the biggest challenge would be to learn all that was necessary to be competent in his role -- knowing the Bible back and front, understanding the depths of theology and being able to cite the greatest movements in church history over the past two thousand years. When he was a freshly ordained years before, he thought his parish life would be emersed in reflection and study. If he got that right, he would be successful in ministry. His wisdom kicked in when he realized that as important as competency is in matters of learning, what shaped his ministry much more than books and knowledge was people. The people he worked with each week and served as their pastor. The dedicated leaders who made most things happen behind the scenes with little to no fanfare or notice, the sometimes disgruntled former leaders who wished the church was the way it used to

be, the people who came in and out of the flock over the years but when they did return they desired his full concern and attention, the more needy folks on the edges with challenges so vast that he hardly knew what to say or where to start, and the quiet ones who seemed to always be present and never caused a stir. All of them filled his days, shaped his ministry and formed the community of care of his life's work. People, not right theology or sound doctrine, grounded him.

All Saints' Day, and the Sunday that follows, is worth celebrating each year for many reasons -- but above it because it is feast about God's people. I like recount how Christmas is about the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus, Easter the Resurrection and Pentecost is the Holy Spirit's Day, and this day is people centered. We are knit together, in the words of the collect, into this mystical body of Christ. We are, whether we like it or not, stuck with other on this side of heaven.

And as we look back to the lives of the saints who have gone before us, whose faith and light made their world a brighter more Christ like place, we can draw upon the best and not so good of their lives. No saint is perfect. Perfection is not the measurement that matters. What matters is living life each day thinking more about God and less than about ourselves. "Easier said than done" -- which is why we pray for grace -- to follow where they have led.

We count today among the saints those we have known, loved and lost since the last All Saints'. We list their names and solemnly read them one by one. A simple act of remembrance.

It is important to remember. We reenact the last meal Jesus shared with his friends each Sunday. Take eat. Take drink. Do this in remembrance of me.

We have been lifting up the theme 'abundant life' over these past weeks to center our annual stewardship conversation not on numbers and budgets, but rather on God's way of adding, blessing and enriching.

John 10:10 Jesus said: The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

When we focus more on what is overflowing in our lives it can make it easier to share what we have instead of keeping it all to ourselves. That is the basic point of what we hope to communicate each year when we connect faith with what we are trying to do through this community.

But there is one more step. Abundance isn't genuine abundance unless and until it is shared by all. Every child of God deserves and desires the opportunity to enjoy the gifts of abundant life. (from the Salt Project)

In today's gospel we see Jesus managing his way through sharp moments of conflict and confrontation with his familiar adversaries the scribes and the Pharisees. He is challenging their authority as they are challenging his. He says to all who could hear that they do not practice what they teach. They put burdens on others without much care. They are all about appearances and honor and status. It is a profoundly negative impression of those leaders.

There could very well be a warning before we read and reflect such a conflict-filled episode that could easily be painted as Jesus vs. Judaism. But deeper study will lead us to learn that the moment this gospel was written, the Jewish community in and around Jerusalem was shaken to its core. The Temple was gone. Some in their community accepted Jesus as the Messiah and some did not. Mother Judaism gave birth to a new Jesus movement. But it came at a cost: relationships were broken.

I have found these last few weeks heartbreaking when it comes to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East that is now a war by any other names. To me, there doesn't seem to be a place to talk about what is going on without falling into familiar pitfalls and assumptions.

Even before the horrendous attacks in Israel October 7, antisemitism in this country and around the world has been on the increase. Synagogues are receiving death threats, swastikas are being painted on walls, and Jewish owned businesses are being vandalized.

I believe one can care deeply about the plight of Palestinians and cry out for the loss of innocent life in Gaza – and decry Islamophobia -- without following into the swamp of centuries of anti-Jewish hatred. Hatred often stoked by the Church and yes Christians! A friend of mine shared this insight last week: It's okay to be heartbroken for more than one group of people at the same time.

If God is the one God for all of creation and all of humanity – in the various ways that oneness is expressed – then following the lives of the Saints can inspire us to find a place of compassion for many.

When I prepare parents as they baptize their children, we go through the baptismal covenant and talk about the promises they are making to raise their children in the Christian faith.

How do they treat one another? How do they speak to those who might take their order at the restaurant or bag their groceries? For Jesus said in v. 11 - the greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

The little ones closest to us watch us to see how we act and behave. They watch before all of their ideas are fully formed, and their positions fixed and cultural biases settle in.

We are being watched over by a great cloud of witnesses who want us to know and feel what they have experienced. This we believe: God is love. Love last forever. Light is stronger than darkness.