

The Rev. Josh Stephens  
St. John in the Wilderness  
Year A, All Saints' Sunday  
November 5, 2023

## All Saints' Sunday: A Celebration of the Church

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On All Saints' Sunday, I'm always reminded of the words of Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, who in the 1930s began radically following Jesus by living with and advocating for the poor and the marginalized. Other people would say she was holy because of how she lived. She threw it right back at them by saying, "Don't call me a saint!"

Today we celebrate the Saints of the Church. Going back to the 3rd or 4th century, early Christians would remember those who were martyred for their faith for confessing Christ as Lord in the midst of popular and political confusion which held that allegiance belonged to Caesar. Christians would visit the places where the martyrdom happened on the date that they happened bringing prayers and food to these heroic witnesses. All Saints' Day became a way to make sure that *All the Saints* were covered since surely some gave their lives without much fanfare or recognition.

Later, in Medieval Christianity, the celebration of All Souls was added to the early November calendar. It was originally a way of not just remembering more ordinary Christians but of interceding on their behalf to help move them along from purgatory and into their heavenly rest. As you might be thinking, the Reformation – including in Anglicanism – did away with such “superstitions” as praying for the dead in revolt against the Church profiteering on widows' fears.

*Today, however, we might gather for All Saints' Sunday as a celebration of Christ's Church. As we will say in a moment in the Apostles' Creed, the Church's oldest and simplest profession of faith and allegiance, we believe in the Communion of Saints. As Anglican Christians, we insist that the Church is made up of all baptized people, “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). In fact, we insist that there is only one Church. With generosity and eager welcome, we recognize the validity of other followers of Jesus who might worship in different buildings on Sunday mornings but whose baptisms into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have made them children of God – members of Christ's one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We might even call them our fellow saints.*

And – *AND* – we believe that this one Church catholic is made up of saints triumphant who gather with us around the throne of God this day – Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven – who forever sing hymns to proclaim the glory of God’s Name (BCP, pg 362). We believe in the heroes and the heroines of the Church. We all have heroes: kids look up to athletes and pop stars; you may look up to historic figures or family members. Well, in the Church we have Saints with a capital “S” who were real people that lived as Jesus lived, by God’s grace. I look up to St. Dymphna whose witness urges me to have patience and compassion and community with those having mental illness or distress. I look up to Jonathan Daniels, that Episcopal seminarian, who was killed in Alabama for insisting on voting rights and education for black folks in 1965. I look up to Thomas Cranmer, whose prayers we say every single day, and who was burned at the stake in Oxford in March 1556. We celebrate them today and we celebrate you because of the “love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

On All Saints’ Sunday, we get to stand at the intersection of the Church and the World because today is a baptismal feast and baptism is where we declare two things. In baptism, we name and claim God’s story as our story *AND* God’s people as our people. It’s at the font – that’s where it happens. That’s where it happened for you and your parents and godparents. And that’s where it happens today for Nicholas Elliot Stephens and his people, too. That font is where saints are made – that’s where you became a saint. These pews are where saints gather. This lectern and pulpit is where saints’ stories are told. That altar is where saints are fed.

And because one family on this All Saints’ Sunday is willing to gather around that font, we all get to gather there now. We all get to take a step back and peer in joy and wonder into those baptismal waters out which saints emerge so we can claim the story of God’s Kingdom as our story and the community of Christ as our people.

It’s not because we can explain it all intelligently or because we never stray into territory where we don’t belong. It’s not like the confusion disappears at baptism or our insecurities are washed away. It just means that we want to receive God’s gift of loving us so well in Christ Jesus. It means we want to know this Prince of Peace more deeply. It means that we are exhausted of the stories of superficiality, greed, and fear that pull at us constantly. At least, at this moment, we rebuke them.

- That with God’s help, we are willing to gather as the Church with this community.
- That with God’s help, whenever we make a mistake, we’ll admit it and ask for forgiveness.
- That with God’s help, we will share this story of Christ. (Man, it’s such Good News!)
- That with God’s help, we will look for Christ in our neighbors, our enemies, and ourselves.

- That with God's help, we will work for a world of justice and peace, where the dignity of every human being is respected.

With God's help you can call me a "saint" – maybe not a saint with a capital "S" but I'll count myself as one. I'll soon count little Nick Stephens as one, too. And all of us who are here, both seen and unseen, you can call all of us saints if you'd like.