

Sermon: All Saints' Sunday 2022  
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods  
6 November 2022  
The Rev. Susan S. Gaumer

Luke 5:20-31  
Ephesians 1:11-23  
Daniel 7:1-3,15-18  
Psalm 149

Today we remember ALL the saints—the ones in stained glass windows or in books, the ones who used to sit among us in this church or around our dinner tables, the ones we miss, and the ones whose names we will never know. They are, every one of them, followers of Jesus who are remembered today, “knit together” into one Communion of Saints as the collect reminds us. They are all here around this altar with us on this day. Here, with us at this Communion rail. Today. With us.

We haven't made it into a book yet, or, much less, stained glass, but it is worth thinking about what the remembered saints have in common with each other and with us—namely that most were baptized as followers of Jesus and in their own ways and times lived into those baptismal vows in ways that made God's love for humankind memorable.

We know that there are still such people, even right here in our midst.

We also know that those baptismal vows are very important, radical even, as they are promises that we will try to do as Jesus did, to live for God, not just for ourselves.

On All Saints' Sunday we renew our own baptismal vows even though no one is to be baptized here today. Last Sunday's baptism was wonderful as a new Christian was made and we all promised to help her to know Jesus and to grow in faith.

It hasn't always been that way in the Episcopal Church. When I was baptized as a young child baptisms were private and usually happened with only the priest, baby, family and Godparents present. Baptism seem to be valued only as a private initiation into faith. I sang in the Junior Choir in the parish I grew up in and one Saturday morning during choir practice we were invited to sing at the baptism of the infant daughter of members of the congregation around the font in the front of the church. I had never witnessed such an event before and, at nine years of age, I was in absolute awe! It was holy! I knew God was there and that we all belonged to God around that font and that we belonged to each other. I am still in touch with that “baby” now a retired professor.

In 1979 the “new” Book of Common Prayer, the one in our pews still, was revolutionary with regard to the importance of baptism. Reaching back to the Early Church as a model, all baptisms were to happen at regular services of worship with the entire congregation taking part and with the Baptismal Covenant said by all as a renewal of baptismal vows.

We’ve come a long way from private baptisms on quiet afternoons!

But the important difference is not just in the ceremony, but in the stress on the content of the vows remembered, spoken again and “owned” by those baptized.

About a half century after I was baptized on that quiet afternoon at St. John’s Church, Lafayette Square in Washington DC, I worshipped there on a Sunday morning. Curious about the font, I went forward to look at it following the service. There had been a terrorist scare at the Capital several days before and Secret Service people were everywhere. As I approached the font a woman came up and told me not to touch the lid. I complied, of course, pretty sure there was no bomb in it, but it occurred to me that the woman probably had no idea about the power a baptism at that font or any other can initiate when the vows are taken seriously and acted upon.

As I was putting this sermon together in my mind, I could not get away from thinking about a saint who will never be remembered in stained glass or in a book of Christian saints. In fact, he was never overtly a follower of Jesus at all because he grew up in Soviet Russia where atheism was a required tenet of Communist thought.

Mikhail Gorbachev was secretly baptized as a young child. His grandmother evidently told him stories about Jesus and made him quietly aware of what being a Christian is about.

As he made his way upward in the Communist world one wonders: Did any of that teaching translate into reforms Gorbachev fought for—a better life for all Russians, or Glasnost—a looking outward beyond the heavy confines of the Soviet Union?

We’ll never know the answers to those questions, but it is tempting to speculate.

Once, following an audience with the Pope as President of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev

paid a visit to Assisi where he was challenged by the press. With his usual tact and sunny personality, he assured his questioners that he was simply a atheistic

tourist, not a pilgrim visiting St. Francis' shrine, but one wonders!

How sad that he lived to see most of his reforms reversed and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch co-opted by Putin into supporting the invasion of Ukraine.

I suspect disappointment is a common experience of most we would remember as saints, because that is part of what human life is about, and they are "just folks like us."

A Christian life isn't always easy and isn't always appreciated, but following the ways of Jesus continues to be worth it.

The rewards are usually intrinsic—a smile of gratitude, the feeling that comes from having done the right thing, even at some personal cost, from having taken a risk for a cause that will mean a better life for another human being.

Following Jesus is a powerful way of being in God's world, so let us together renew our baptismal vows.