

All Saints' Sunday, November 1, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland.
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Today is not only the Sunday closest to All Saints Day, it IS All Saints Day! November 1st. The word "Saint" comes from the Greek word *hagios*, meaning "holy one" - St. Paul gave it to us as the word that applied to every baptized person - he used it to refer to every member of every community he ever wrote to, and you might say that he used it especially to those communities where stuff was happening that he didn't like! It's an 'equal opportunity' word: it comes with no moral overtones applied to those who bore it, no concrete evidence of a transformed life, no prior requirements except baptism.

In our culture, that broad and open meaning has been lost. The word "saint" is now most often and obviously applied to institutional individuals who stood out from the crowd on the basis of their moral uprightness or profound actions on behalf of the Institutional Church.

Occasionally that title gets applied to a person who has acted in a selfless way, whose personal piety and behavior is noteworthy for its moral integrity or personal bravery and servanthood.

While Paul might recognize and honor the second type of person - the personal piety and behavior' person - he would be extremely unlikely to reserve that word - "saint" only for that individual or others like them. And he would never have reserved "saint" for an institutional hero.

"Saint," Paul would have said, belongs to every baptized person.

There's another celebration that happens on this day - at least in the Anglican tradition - and it's one that is often not mentioned, though it is honored: All Souls Day - October 31/yesterday. We combine it with All Saints' Day and tip our hats to it by including in the announcements the list of names of those from this community, or from your families, who have died.

So if you asked me (and I'm going to assume you will do so now!) what I'd say about this day, I would reply like this:

Today we're celebrating the 'us-ness' of this community; we holding each other before us, irrespective of whether we know each other nor not, irrespective of whether we like each other or not, irrespective of if we agree with each other nor not; irrespective..... and we're saying "Hi, fellow Saint, I'm glad you're here!"

Today we're also marking a transition. Each year on this day we acknowledge those who have died and recognizing that we as a community are different because of their absence. It's also an opportunity for us to reflect on the way that things 'die' within our community, and to look for signs of new birth with the transitions that such "dying" reflect.

A group of us - varying in size from fifteen to twenty - have met regularly for the last five weeks to explore what the bible has to say about community. It's been a joyous ride! This last Friday we

explored what lies at the very heart of St. Paul's vision of community: a vision that appears throughout his authentic letters, but primarily in the center of the letter to the Galatian community and throughout the first letter to the Corinthian community.

To the Galatians Paul says "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" (3:27-28) "This is who we are," Paul is saying, "and this is who we will be, together."

To the Corinthians Paul speaks of the new community as an organic body, but not just any body, the Body of Christ, and not just the Body of Christ, but the Body of Christ crucified. This new community is entered through baptism, that baptism is "into Christ," and once entered, the new member discovers that the central marker of community is the absence of any distinction in terms of rank, status, gender, or nationality

As we studied this passage about the Body of Christ crucified in chapter 12 several of Paul's core theological claims became evident about the new Community:

1. It's a community of radical equality, where the only difference is one of function.
2. It's a community of radical diversity where everyone is welcome.
3. It's a community where everyone commits to remain together, especially in the face of disagreement.

And we wondered, how might we shape this community using Paul's vision?

One way is to develop a congregational "rule of life" - it's something that the monastic tradition has done for seventeen hundred years. What are we to expect from and of one another? What do we each commit to ourselves? How do we understand our common life? This is something we all agreed we want to explore as we journey through this year in which we have committed to explore the meaning of community for us all.

Another thing we discovered is that the chapter in this letter - chapter 13 - that's perhaps the best known of all of Paul's writings actually offers us help. You remember chapter 13: "*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*" Do you remember how that chapter ends? "*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*"

It turns out that the whole of 1 Corinthians is about these three virtues; that Paul uses Chapter 13 to sum up all he's said before.

Faith relates to the Cross, and, for Paul, it deconstructs human power, wisdom, charismatic gifts, self-seeking glory, and dominating unity.

Hope is about the resurrection, the story of transformation accessible to all of us as children of God; hope is the story of human possibility.

And love is about the community, a community of Christ crucified where we are called to build up and embrace a vision of undifferentiated relationship: no distinction in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity; rather, we are called to reconstruct God's dream for us of a community of diversity for all, a loving, faithful, and hopeful community.

Christ, Paul says, invites us to join him in a journey of faith, hope, and love in a community where people are interrelated and interdependent for their existence.

In just a moment we will again renew our own baptismal vows. At the heart of that renewal are the strong echoes of Paul's vision of community in 1 Corinthians, that love is central, that diversity resides in God's creation as God's intent for us, that unity is the fruit of honoring and embracing that diversity and that love; and that the transformation of all things - and especially of ourselves - is the core vision of our faith and the goal that we are called to seek as we continue our shared pilgrims' journey.