

All Saints Sunday, November 2, 2014. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Today is a day about community. Yes, we're remembering the saints – and we tend to think of them as “those who have gone before.” Certainly the list in the bulletin, along with the readings and hymns lead us in that direction – saints are stained-glass heroes of the faith who did some amazing thing beyond the ability of any of us to mirror – the MVPs' of Christianity - all now dead.

St. Paul, however, applies that term – “Saints” – to every member of the communities under his care; he writes to “those called to be saints” – the Greek word “hagios” gets translated as “saints” in that phrase, but it actually means “holy ones.”

Think “holy gifts for holy people.” We enter this place from the world of the mundane. We're come from our homes and our every-day environments where we tend our houses and our families, where we shop at the grocery store, or go to a job, or do the myriad other things that make up our lives. And through the process of this service, in some mysterious way, we don't stop being those every-day folks, but we do also become something else: holy ones. So that when we share the holy gifts we do so as holy people, as “saints.” We are, in other words, transformed from a group of individuals into a community.

The word that names this day is a plural word – have you noticed? It's not “Saint Sunday” – its not about individual holy persons, but all holy people, all saints.

This day is, in other words, about all of us – about every single baptized person who's a part of this community. About every single baptized person who's a part of this community, **present or not.**

We include everyone. There's a generosity in this community of the baptized. We as Christians say that if you want to be a part of this community then you're welcome any time under any conditions to join us. And if you decide, having spent some time with us, that you want to stay, and take the next step, then that next step – if you haven't been baptized – is baptism. And if you're already baptized, there is no next step – you're ‘in' already! There's no means test, no morality test, no intelligence test, no finance test, no test at all. You're ‘in' through baptism!

But there's also a flip side to that, and that's where the word “responsibility” comes into the picture. Being part of a community of faith involves each of us taking some responsibility for the life of the community – through baptism we become responsible FOR each other AND responsible TO each other.

I think we get the “FOR” part of that responsibility. That's a part of what saying that we'll continue in “the apostles teaching AND FELLOWSHIP” means in our first baptismal promise.

If you look up the word “fellowship” you'll find definitions like “the condition of being in friendly relationship or companionship,” and “a community of interest or feeling.” We are companions, we are part of a community that shares a common interest about what it means to be

a follower of Jesus of Nazareth; we're ones who share a common emotion, a common feeling about being people of faith. I suppose it's saying that our faith is both intellectual commitment and affective relationship with others.

Through baptism we become responsible FOR each other AND responsible TO each other.

The "responsible TO each other" is the harder part of being part of that responsibility.

The letter to the Hebrews says this best, I think: ".....since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

Running with perseverance the race that is set before us involves being responsible to the great cloud of witnesses – community is always a two-way street, or it isn't community.

We live in a culture that is excessively individualistic, that invites us to think about ourselves first, primarily, and always. Our faith invites us to think about ourselves last, secondarily, and, if possible, not at all. Sometimes – often (hopefully) if we live the Christian life – we can live that second way – it's a hope and a vision, not an expectation or a requirement. But the rugged individualism of our culture screams "NOOOO!" when any suggestion that we should be accountable to others is made. We want to be in control, we want to call the shots.

When we can't call the shots – especially if you're like me...used to being in charge of stuff – it sometimes feels like it's easier to walk away. And sometimes it *is* easier to walk away!

Our faith demands (and I don't use that word lightly) we do not walk away, we do not take the easy path; our faith demands we do the hard work that's set before us because it is the most fruitful work we can ever do as individuals and as a community when it comes to our faith.

Our faith does not demand that – even though we're accountable to each other – we agree on everything set before us, that we agree with each other on every issue that Christians face, even that we agree on most issues that Christians face. Faith doesn't demand that sort of agreement.

We have a "rule of thumb" – it was last week's gospel: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Everything depends on this!"

Genuine faith always has consequences. We are called to live a particular way. If we don't live the way of God that we promise to adhere to each week, what sort of Christians are we?

So this day is a reminder that faith is a two-way street: the community of which we are a part places obligations on us: we have a responsibility for the life of the community, AND we have a responsibility to the community.

As we now journey to that place when we will renew our vows I invite you to consider how making those vows is done not only to God but to your brother and sister Christians who will now stand beside you. To that renewal we now go.