

All Saints' Sunday, 11/5/17 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 34:1-10, 22, 1 John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12

Here we are again! All Saint's Sunday. And is there anyone here who hasn't sung "For all the Saints, who from their labors rest"? I remember singing it at my mother's funeral - and at others, too. Lots of language about the faithful dead! [and the same sort of language showed up again in the hymn we just sung]. There's a list in the bulletin of names that continue the theme - anyone you want remembered who's gone before. That list came to mind for me when I was checking the parish register last Tuesday - and I wondered how many of the faithful dead have been buried from this place since I came here in late 2000 - the answer's 70., So I suppose this is a 'tip-of-the-hat' to each and every one of them, who've joined the great cloud of witnesses that both the book of Revelation and the Letter to the Hebrews mention.

It's an important thing to do - remembering those who have gone before! That's why there's a special day for it. It's not today! Remembering and celebrating the faithful departed who've gone before is celebrated on the day that follows All Saints Day - which is "All Souls Day" - truly the *Día de Muertos* - the Day of the Dead.

We've collapsed the two days into one - today.

We live in an age when the idea of "days of obligation" no longer holds sway - after all, the more days you add to that list, the more likely it is that folk will pick and choose. So why not combine?

I think there's another reason for combining the two: the strong temptation to embrace the mighty saints who charged fearlessly into the fray, willing to give their all for the cause. That's entirely appropriate! Of course, it also gets us (somewhat) off the hook. Here are folk who have done the 'heavy lifting' so that we don't have to feel guilty if we don't join the lifting crew in our own day!

So what about "Saints?" Not a New Orleans football team! Paul called every member of every community he wrote to by that name: "Saints." In Greek the word is "*hagios*," and the accurate translation is "holy ones." He used that name even - perhaps especially - to the members of the communities that he had issues with: the Corinthians in particular, and the Galatians too. And he used it to the communities with whom he had no issues - like the one in Philippi, a community who loved him deeply and whom he loved just as much.

In each case he implied or actually used the present continuous tense when talking about holy ones. We hear "Those called to be saints;" he said "those who are in the process of becoming - of being formed into - holy ones."

And how did they begin becoming holy ones? Through baptism!

The present continuous tense applies to every one of us who has been baptized - Paul could say of us that we've been "called to be saints" and we're on that irreversible journey. That reality has to be "front and center" for us on this day. We, now, carry the banner, the standard; we now are

God's faithful and generous people; we now are called to take our place among the saints of all times and all seasons to be faithful stewards and partners in the renewal of all creation.

What are the markers of that sainthood? The first letter of John reminds us that we're loved, that we're called children of God, and that we're a part of the great cloud of witnesses – even if we don't fully comprehend what that means – that we're *still* included as a part of the great, never-ending story,

If love is the marker of our sainthood, then our calling as Christians is to reflect that great love – God's love – as much as we are able, out of our own flawed humanity – so that the world may see God.

So, yes, today we remember and acknowledge those who have gone before – the faithful “who, from their labors rest” – and, yes, we stand in solidarity with them.....with one exception: we're those who aren't yet resting from their labors – at least, I suppose, hopefully we're not resting! There's still work for the saints of God – for us – to do!

Is that what you signed up for? Because you did sign up – in baptism! Or, perhaps, someone else signed you up...but you've confirmed that signature each time you've renewed your baptismal vows – as you will do again today.

Baptism! One of my fondest memories of a baptism was of my niece Louise - that would be 44 years ago now! It's still the most vivid memory of a baptism I have – at Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Cookham, Berkshire. The building dates back a thousand years, and most of it was built by the Normans. It has the traditional Norman square tower, and inside there are large flagstones around the font. The day of the baptism sunbeams shone in through the high windows and lit up the font, leaving everyone around it in shadow – it was easy to imagine them as a great cloud of witnesses!

One of the reasons I remember my niece's baptism is because of how the priest described it: he called it a “christening.” When that word's used today most folk don't know what it means – unless you pronounce it this way: “Christ-en-ing.” It means, quite literally, being remade in the image of Christ.

That's an image that goes back to the early church. When the newly baptized – most of them adults – emerged from the baptismal waters in which they'd been fully immersed, they were immediately clothed in white robes, and for the first time went into the church for eucharist. As they did so, people came and knelt before them and asked for their blessing. Why, because they were (in the words of one scholar) “freshly minted icons of Christ.” They had been “christened”....”christened.”

I wonder, do we think of ourselves as ‘icons of Christ’ each time we renew our baptismal vows? More importantly, do we act that way?

That makes what you're about to do – renew your own baptismal vows – somewhat more

challenging than you might previously have thought! And if you wonder to yourself about the wisdom of renewing your vows – well, good for you! We should all wonder about that, because it means we're taking them seriously! .

Let's go and do it, shall we?!