

“KEEPING THE FAITH”
Matthew 5:1-12; Revelation 7:9-17
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My wife and I got the call while we were in upstate New York for a few days vacation in June. Our nephew's wife and her sister, ages 25 and 29, were in the basement of a home that our nephew, wife and family were planning to move into the next day. The young women had been talking on their cell phones with their husbands, who were in a truck with the furniture. All of a sudden they mysteriously quit talking. Sensing that there was something wrong, the two men called 911 immediately. By the time the ambulance arrived, it was already too late. Both had been overcome by carbon monoxide fumes and were dead. The authorities said that they had died within fifteen minutes of entering the basement of the home.

Still trying to make sense of something that defies theological explanation, the family asked me to conduct Jessica's funeral, which I did. I will never forget seeing her lifeless body lying there in the church, with her husband and three children in the front row — Huston, 5, Teddy 3, and Irene only five months old, and still breast feeding at the time of her mother's death. It has been five months since this tragedy, but our entire extended family is still reeling from the loss. My nephew is putting one foot in front of the other, doing what he has to do to keep a job and care for his children, with a lot of help from family and friends.

One of the traditions of the Christian church going back through the years is that each year on November 1, we pause to remember those who have been part of the church, but who are with us on our earthly journey no more. We call it “All Saints Day,” and in this church we set aside the first Sunday of November to remember not only the members of our congregation who have gone on ahead of us to be in the presence of God, but all those who we name in our hearts this day. All were created by God. All are precious and loved by him.

First of all, we pause to mourn our earthly loss. They have left a vacuum that will not be filled. Life will never be the same again without them. Second, we pause to give thanks for their example, for what they have taught us, as it says in the funeral liturgy, “For all that they have given to us to make us what we are.” But as Christians, there is another dimension to our worship. For we pause not only to remember their lives, but also to be reminded of the hope that we have for eternal life, both for them and for ourselves.

A man who was widowed a few months ago asked me recently, “Where is my wife now?” While different passages of Scripture suggest several possibilities, the best answer I can give is that **our departed loved ones are with God**. The passage from Revelation, which is our Lectionary reading for All Saints Day, tells us that they are rejoicing before God's throne. “*The one who is seated on the throne will shelter them,*” the Bible tells us. “*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more, the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water,*

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev. 7:15-19) Yes, my friends, our loved ones are with God. God is caring for them, even to the point of taking a handkerchief and wiping the tears from their eyes. What a beautiful, comforting image that is!

They are with God now, and yet in a very real way **they are with us** — in our memories and in our hearts. Many of you know that when you join the church, you continue always to be part of the church unless you request to be removed from the membership. We say “once baptized, always baptized.” You can stray from the faith, but you cannot erase God’s mark upon you. When a Christian person dies, he or she does not cease to be a member of the church. Those who die become part of the “Church Triumphant.” We worship God here on earth; they worship God in heaven. When we gather for worship, they join us in worshiping God, and praising God’s name.

You will notice that I have used the word “saint” several times. In our modern culture, we have come to think of saints as special people who lived near-perfect lives and who have been officially acclaimed as saints by church authorities. These faith ancestors have excelled spiritually, lived miraculously, and died courageously. However, if we read our Bibles carefully we will find that this view is not quite accurate. Saints are individuals both living and dead, who believe in Jesus and who want God to be part of their lives. Saints are spiritual heroes and heroines within the realm of religion and the realm of the Spirit. Saints are people to whom we look up, people from whom we receive inspiration, people for whom we derive encouragement, people through whom we receive a better understanding of God. Because of these saints, we exhibit a more loving spirit toward all humankind.

Let me be clear, saints are not people whom God loves more than others, although maybe saints are people who love God more than most. Saints are individuals who have lost jobs, made critical mistakes, and harbor their share of doubts. These are people who have also reached exquisite heights of fidelity, lived penitently, embraced the kind of convictions that build cathedrals, and demonstrated by their actions that God is love.

A little boy walked into our sanctuary with his daddy. They looked up at the beautiful stained glass windows. The sun was shining brightly. In each window was a person of faith. “Who are all those people?” the little boy asked. “They are the saints of the church,” his father replied. “Oh, I see,” said the boy. **“Saints are people the light shines through.”**

There you have it! Saints are people the light shines through. Saints are people who put flesh on the vision of God and live in such a way that they build a world where love is primary, right relationships are non-negotiable, and peace is possible. Saints are people the light shines through. They are an inspiration to us! Their lives make it possible for us to see God more clearly. On this day, every day, we are surrounded by saints who have gone before us. We are blessed by saints who live among us.

Before today is over, I would like you to make a list of your saints, living and dead. Who are the people the light shines through for you, the people whose lives help you get a better picture of God? Who are the people who inspire you, not just to make it through the day, but to attempt greater things for God?

My list is long this morning. But I would like us to think about a couple of the saints right here at Church of the Saviour who meant a great deal in my life, and to whom we said goodbye this year. For over 25 years, Ed Holland was a faithful member of this congregation. He served on the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, and was serving on the Worship Council at the time of his death. He was a loving husband and a devoted father. He never missed one of his

kids swim meets or football games or lacrosse matches or marching band events. In a large congregation pastors don't get well acquainted with every parishioner. But I got to know Ed. I had the opportunity to have some great conversations with him when I visited him in the hospital a couple years ago following surgery. Rather than to talk about himself, he always talked about those that he loved. His main concern was for his children's future and the well-being of his family. Last year Ed expressed to the clergy that he wanted to go deeper in his faith journey. He became part of a *Disciple* Bible Study class. He attended the class faithfully. In fact, he was in class the Wednesday before the week-end that he died. Ed was not "famous" in the movie star sense of the word. But he is to me a saint, an wonderful example of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. His faith, his commitment, his priorities, his gentle spirit are an example for all of us. His life is an inspiration to me.

Over the past ten years, I was privileged to know and to count as a dear friend the gentle and loving spirit of Eldred Bucklew, who served on the staff of Church of the Saviour from 1959 until 1998. When I get weary, when I get discouraged, I think of Eldred who gave 39 years to this congregation, his whole working life. The prayers that he wrote are timeless. They speak to us of the God he knew, the God he loved, and the God he followed to the best of his ability. Thousands of children received Christian education under his careful leadership and loving direction. Hundreds of babies were baptized, couples married, and parishioners laid to eternal rest through his ministry. The number of hospital calls, and the number of hours he spent in counseling sessions in the office and in people's homes are known only to God. More than a pastor, he was a friend to those in the church and those outside the church. On my list of saints is the Rev. Eldred Bucklew, faithful servant of Jesus Christ.

The saints we name in our hearts this day worshiped Jesus during their earthly lives, and we believe they are worshiping Jesus today. As the Scripture passage from Revelation reminds us, they are worshiping the Lamb of God, who is on the throne, the Son of God, who gave his life that we might experience life in all its fullness. Who is on the throne in your life? Who or what are you worshiping? Who is in charge of your life?

The saints help us "keep the faith." Reflecting on their lives helps us to stay focused. Thinking about them reminds us what is really important in life. Remembering them can help us keep our eyes on Jesus as we continue life's journey. Yes, the saints are those the light shines through.

When we get discouraged, when we get depressed, when we get weary, let us remember the saints. They persevered. They kept the faith in good times and in difficult times. May their memory inspire us; may their deeds encourage us; and may their example energize us to attempt greater things for God. May their witness help us to "**keep the faith,**" that all might come to know the love and grace of God.

Prayer: Dear God, for all the saints, who from their labors rest, we give you thanks and praise. This morning we name in our hearts those that are near and dear to us, and we give you thanks for their memory and for the example they provide for us. Help us to draw inspiration from their witness, that we may keep the faith, and follow you faithfully all the days of our lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

