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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
4th November, 2007

The Feast of All Saints

Propers:

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10,13-14

•Revelation 7:2-4,9-17

•Matthew 5:1-12

It is sometimes said that a saint is an ordinary person doing an ordinary thing in an extraordinary way. And ordinary person doing an ordinary thing in an extraordinary way.

Our Chanters just sang, "And I want to be one too" – a saint, that is. In other words, I want to be an ordinary person who does an ordinary thing in an extraordinary thing.

And I suggest to you that that is exactly what we are celebrating today on the Feast of All Saints: Ordinary people like you and me who have done – and who do daily – ordinary things, but in a way that is downright extraordinary.

The ordinary people I think of include men and women who have lost their partners and spouses, but who, in the face of terrible grief, manage somehow to, as the British would say, "soldier on." People who have lost their children gently tumble into this category, as well – their ability to put aside, even for a moment, the burden of their loss in order to reach out to someone else.

Those saints are with us. Not just today, but always. St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of saints, witnesses to the truth about God, witnesses to the glory of the risen Christ. Our Patron, John, wrote to us about "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" – the multitude who have gone before us, the multitude who are with us now, the multitude who will follow us. The saints of God.

I've told you this story before, but I think it is important, and so I'm going to tell it again... In the English village of Tisbury, I celebrated the Eucharist at an altar that is seven hundred years old. Seven hundred years! I must tell you: Before I could utter the first words of the Sursum Corda, "The Lord be with you," I had to stop. Flashing before me, surrounding me, drifting and dancing, were the saints who had gone before. The generations of priests and deacons and laypeople who had approached this ancient altar, and people who had suffered greatly for their faith. Roman Catholics. Then Protestants. Then Roman Catholics again. Then Puritans. Then Anglicans. Good old Church of England people. Thousands and thousands — the cloud of saints.

Even here at St. John's — think about it. This church is over one hundred years old. Doing simple math, the Eucharist has been celebrated at this altar at *least* five thousand two hundred times. Give us an average of, oh, maybe 45 to 80 in attendance, that means that Christ's Body and Christ's Blood have been taken about *three hundred twenty five thousand* times. Six hundred fifty thousand hands reaching out for the sacrament. One hundred thirty thousand tongues thirsty for the grace of God in Christ. Your hands, your tongues. My hands, my tongue. The hands and tongues of the saints of God.

The saints of God – and I want to be one too.

I was a seminary intern at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Now if you've never been there, let me just give you a bit of a snapshot of that massive church. The distance from the West Door to the High Altar is two football fields and one football. The Statue of Liberty could stand in the Nave. There are seven chapels behind the choir. The front doors weigh three tons. Everything about the Cathedral of St. John the Divine is *big*.

As you may imagine, the walls of the cathedral contain hundreds of stained glass windows. The Rose Window above the west doors is the largest stained glass window in the United States. The Christ in the center is *life-size*. In nearly every window there is a saint. There are the usual suspects – St. John the Divine, our Patron, of course; St. Paul; Biblical figures such as Abraham and Sarah. But then your eye catches something very interesting. There's a baseball player. There's a soldier. There's a nurse. There's someone sitting in front of what *looks* like a computer. There's an astronaut. There's all *kinds* of unlikely people scattered through the windows – and these people, my friends, are the saints of today. The ordinary people who did many ordinary things – and some of them did them extraordinarily well. Most of them, I suggest to you, would never have *dreamed* that they'd end up in a stained glass window.

The saints of God – and I want to be one too.

What about you. Will you end up in a stained glass window? Even if it's just a very small stained glass window? Even if it's a stained glass window that's merely an etching on someone's heart, a lovely memory?

Saints are vulnerable. Fully human. They take chances – on themselves, on others. They put themselves last in the pack. They set aside their own self-interest. They let go of their ego, their pride – they *care* – about you. About me. And they do something so very ordinary. They love. And they love with an extraordinary ability.

The saints of God – I want to be one too.

There's nothing particularly brave about being a saint. I'm guessing, in fact, that most saints never even thought to themselves, "Uh-oh, this is pretty scary stuff, I'd better be brave." They may not have even known they were placing themselves in danger – or that their safety would be compromised. I think of civil rights workers, who yearned to do what was right. I think of that young man in Tiananmen Square – April, 1989. A thousand or more people had been brutally gunned down because they were protesting harsh government policies. The next day a lone man walked in front of a column of tanks along, ironically, the Avenue of Eternal Peace. They stopped. They'd move. He'd move. They'd move. He'd move. It stopped. I always imagine him walking home from work, having stopped at the store to pick up something to cook for dinner, when he happened upon this horrendous scene. Then with nothing more than sheer force of will, he stopped the madness. He was a hero to me – and to many Chinese, he was a saint.

The saints of God – I really want to be one.

I think of the innocents. The holy innocents. People who have lost property, prestige, *lives* because of who they are, what they believed. Or – just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Civilian casualties of war – one million Armenians during World War I. Eight million in the Russian Civil War. The Holocaust. The Nanking Massacre. Dresden, Hiroshima, London, Tokyo. The uncounted of Iraq and Afghanistan – both before and since our incursion there. The truly Lost of Darfur. Holy innocents. Saints of God.

The saints of God. You see, this is where I stop. This is where I get off the sainthood bus. Because as much as I'd love to be in a stained glass window, I really don't want to be a martyr. I just want to be a run-of-the-mill saint.

And perhaps that's enough.

Perhaps it's enough to simply *want* to be the best person that God intends for me to be. Perhaps it's enough to do what I can to make some small change in the world, some tiny bit of difference. Perhaps it's enough to simply love to the best of my ability. To do something ordinary but to do it extraordinarily well – because through grace we can all do something like that.

Today we praise famous men and women. We praise not-so-famous men and women. We welcome them back, as it were, so that we can give great thanks for the gifts they have given us. It's like a party, where God has sent out the invitations — and we are all — *all* — invited. Look around you. The saints of today. Some day, not soon, I trust, the future saints will hear your name here. Someone will remember you — your gifts, your presence, the way you've lifted this church and strengthened it and helped it grow. The way you've reached out to the poor. The way you talked about justice and God's love. The way you persevered.

Let us pray that by God's grace our names will be worthy of that remembrance, that tiny stained glass window etched in someone's heart. God can and will give us strength in the years to come — strength to give, strength to receive, strength to stretch our hands out for the Body of Christ, and strength to lift our hands in hard work. The saints are with us today, as they always are. So for now, for today, give thanks — and praise the names of famous and not-so-famous saints.