

THE CHALLENGE OF THE SAINTS
All Saints Day 2009
The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach Va
www.aidanvbva.net

Trying to explain today's All Saints service to those outside the church is an interesting exercise. We live in a death defying culture that is only now is just beginning through groups like hospice to put us back in touch with one the natural process that is the end of life, which is death. Many in today's world are completely removed from the passing of a loved one. Learning of the death through a doctor or nurse. Then the body is removed by the funeral home and taken care of by strangers. I know one retirement home that locks the residents in their rooms and requires the funeral home to come after 10:00 p.m. in an unmarked van to remove a body. Other cultures do not do this and because of their closer connection to death would automatically understand the need for today's service. When asked how long should it take a person to "get over" the death of a family member and return to work fully functional, most Americans in a recent poll state that a week should be sufficient. In light of that cultural norm, what we do here today makes no sense to many people.

Yet today's service makes all kinds of sense if we understand what it is we do today and every year on All Saints Sunday. In every funeral homily I give I always begin with the rubrics, the words of instruction, in the prayer book about funerals.

The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all its meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised. The liturgy, therefore, is characterized by joy, in the certainty that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian. The very love we have for each other in Christ brings deep sorrow when we are parted by death. Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend. So, while we rejoice that one we love has entered into the nearer presence of our Lord, we sorrow in sympathy with those who mourn. BCP

This is the heart of our theology about funerals and leads to our theology about, death, life after death and the Communion of Saints that we reference in the Apostles Creed which we will say at 10:30 when we baptize our newest member. (when we reaffirm our baptismal promises at 8:15) For it is the Communion of Saints that we celebrate today.

So what does it mean in the Apostle's Creed or the baptismal promises when we say, "I believe in the Communion of Saints," for that is the essence of today's service.

To start with, we need to examine the word communion. The dictionaryⁱ definition is the act of sharing or holding in common: association/fellowship. In this case the holding in common is Jesus, Jesus as the Christ, our Lord and Savior. The communion is of all Christians.

Saints in this context is an ancient concept. The first definition of saint in the dictionary is exactly what one would expect, those officially recognized historical figures that have been made saints by the Church. The second definition is the one that applies here. "A designation of some religious groups applied by the members to themselves." So we are all saints under this definition.

The Rev. John Wall in the *New Dictionary for Episcopalians*ⁱⁱ defines the Communion of Saints as "The doctrine that a spiritual union exists between Christ and all Christians living or dead; saint here is used in its original sense as meaning any baptized Christian." The collect today says; "God has knit together in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord" all of us.

That mystical vision plays out in a variety of ways. I know one mystic who speaks of a time sitting in the choir loft of a large cathedral. She saw the priest standing and celebrating, but it seemed like there were others standing behind him. The line stretched into the distance. This felt she said as if all the priests that had ever stood at that altar were there joining in the celebration. I know that there is a power especially in the very old churches that one feels in standing behind the altar. It is the sense of the presence of the past, a presence of the spirit of all who have been.

The Communion though is about more than just the past, but it is about the present and the future as well. November 2 is All Souls Day where we celebrate the, is and is to come part of the Communion. It is also natural to then celebrate new life, new members on this day which is one of 4 designated days for baptism. So on this day as we remember the past we also look forward to the future. One of the ways we do this is with the baptism and if there is no baptism the congregation reaffirms their baptismal promises.

Celebrating the Communion of Saints also means that we carry on the work that they have done. We have had many "saints" in this parish, many of whom we acknowledge today. This is why I designated this as the day to turn in our pledge cards and look towards the future, the "is to come part" of our life as a parish.

We are called above all else to carry on the work of creating a place where disciples are formed. On my Facebook page it says that I am an Episcopal priest dedicated to helping people live into their baptismal promises. This is what making disciples is all about and the reason that we exist.

When interviewing for this position, Bishop Buchanan said that this was a special parish that I was being called to and he was right. You too are stewards of a very special place.

A special place where the children we baptize today can grow into disciples of Christ. This is a special place where those seeking a deeper relationship with God can come and encounter God. We are called to carry on the work of making disciples of all regardless of age that was started here some 40 plus years ago.

We do this in a variety of ways. One of the ways is the generous gifts of our time, talent and today our treasure. Did you take the time to look at the list of ways people serve God in this parish? This is a list that belongs to a much larger parish.

That part we do pretty well at, but we do face our challenges. Many priests, especially in the Episcopal Church, shy away from talking about money. We are too polite to talk about money, but in case you haven't noticed, I'm not like that. I'm not as bad as the one Baptist preacher in Cleveland who sent the plate back around a second time because enough money had not been donated for that weeks bills, but I care so much about this parish and this church that I will hold your feet to the fire in this area.

We are at one of those critical points in the life of a congregation. Our budget allows us to exist, but limits our ability to do the mission that God has given us to do. As I say in the dismissal, 'this service has ended yours service is just beginning.' Sunday worship is just the start of what we are called to do.

This year the Stewardship Committee did something different. We scheduled a series of cottage meetings to talk about our budget and the challenges that we face. During those meetings I called on all of us to stretch ourselves, be willing to risk being great. I have challenged and will challenge you to take the risk to be faithful and allow God to do God's work. I am asking you to respond to God's call to us to live the promises of the baptismal service. The two components where I really want us to stretch is in our commitment to Christian Formation which currently is less than 1% of our total budget and in the area of outreach which is less than 3% of our budget. Our baptismal promises call us, challenges us, to expand our work in these areas. God has great plans for this parish and today we begin anew to build on those plans.

We would not be where we are without the sacrifice of those saints in the past. That we will continue to be here, to grow and flourish into the parish that God calls us to be is up to you, the saints of today.

ⁱ Jess Stein editor, *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*. (Random House NY 1966)

ⁱⁱ The Rev. John N. Wall, Jr. *A New Dictionary for Episcopalians* (Harper Row, San Francisco 1985) pg 51.