

St. Catherine's Episcopal Church
Sermon – November 7, 2021 – All Saints' Sunday
The Rev. Allen W. Farabee

We know they are there, all the saints. They are the ones whose lives shine with the unbearable lightness of being. For most of us, life is heavy. We feel it every day. Just this week, in some correspondence with a friend, I admitted that I felt really tired, with so much on my shoulders. Just heavy. It feels like the ordinary weight of life, with all its worries, failures, troubles and heartaches. Not long ago, my younger son, John, confessed that his life was freighted with the longings of children on one end, and the weakness and fragility of parents on the other.

Ordinarily, our lives feel both heavy and ordinary, not so much heroic as labored. So, when we assemble to remember the saints on this Feast of All Saints, we escape our comfort zone and celebrate those others who have run “like sparks through the stubble,” in the words of scripture. Mention of “all the saints” carries us into a world where “first things have passed away,” and “ineffable joys” seem possible.

They are a motley crew, the saints, I mean. In our calendar of holy women and men, there are hordes of monks, nuns, and ordained persons. Of the laity, many are royalty. Some of those on the list were tortured, burned at the stake, spread the gospel to India, Persia, Armenia, or translated the Bible under the most challenging circumstances. Important people, we presume, at least in memory. We remember them with great thanksgiving, we marvel at their courage, we imagine them in glory. And we return to our heavy and labored lives, feeling inadequate or overwhelmed.

But imagine Mother Constance and her companions, who found themselves at the center of yellow fever in Memphis and stayed to help. What do you suppose they felt in the heat and putrefaction of Memphis, with friends and strangers dying all about them? Do you suppose they were comforted by pious promises of holy reward? Do you imagine they felt righteous beyond the reach of torment? If anything, don't you think their lives felt heavy and dense and daunting. We remember them as saints, but they must have wondered what “new things” they were forging.

Imagine Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, Bishop of Shanghai,

Paralyzed in every limb, and with his powers of speech partly gone, sitting for nearly twenty-five years in the same chair, slowly and painfully typing out with two fingers his Mandarin translation of the Bible.

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Do you suppose he wondered why his life had come to this heavy place, why he was so bound and disciplined, why the Lord had allowed him such suffering and pain? We remember him as a saint, but he must have hoped that with the passing of the first things, he was hastening in a new heaven and a new earth.

Imagine Jonathan Daniels, young man from New Hampshire who was captured by the light on Easter Sunday at the Church of the Advent in Boston, midst clouds of incense, the radiant sounds of holy music, and the company of ordinary men and women. From that moment, he turned to follow Jesus, to seek virtuous and godly living. During Evensong at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, he heard, as if for the first time, the promise of the *Magnificat*, that God has “cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly.” This ordinary young man went to Mississippi to help in voter registration of African Americans too long deprived of their right to vote. Suddenly, he pushed Ruby Sales to safety and was killed by the blast of a shotgun. Do you suppose in that moment before he died, that Jonathan Daniels expected to be given a place on the church's calendar of saints? Do you suppose he felt like a sacrificial burnt offering?

Imagine our sister Bernice Hull. She's not in the Prayer Book, but she surely has an honored place in our book of saints. Imagine the heaviness of her life, with the literal weight of her oxygen tank, the aching of her bones, the burden of her congested heart. As her life began to fold in, do you suppose Bernice felt among the honored few? Do you imagine she felt comforted by the hope of immortality?

Look around you at the banners of those of our fellowship who died since last All Saints Day. Ordinary and beloved. Surely in the hands of God and at peace. And we remember their running like sparks through the stubble of this world; and we know that God's grace and mercy rests upon them.

Don't you see what an ordinary bunch they are? But their lives were lifted by the unbearable lightness of being. And when we finally remember them rightly, we have no better gospel than the raising of Lazarus. Surely just an ordinary man, the brother of two sisters, friend of Jesus, not so different from other men in Palestine. But he died. And Jesus wept. And then Jesus went to the tomb; they took away the stone; and Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Then Jesus said to them, “Unbind him and let him go.”

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And all the saints we remember on this feast day, the long-ago heroes, the bearers of scars of the kingdom, the men and women who offered lives of virtuous and godly living, are the ones who were unbound and set forth. It must be a breathtaking gift to be unbound, to be released from the heaviness of life, to be set free to sit patiently before the typewriter, to absorb the deadly cloud of yellow fever, to face the shotgun in the moment of terror, to feel the oxygen tank transformed from a weight into a medallion of light.

We know they are there, the saints. We can read about their bravery and persistence, their faith and their grace. And, on this Feast of All Saints, isn't it astonishing that Jesus still stands by the mouth of our graves and calls out, "Unbind them and let them go." With that simple command the Lord knits us together in one communion and fellowship. And we also may run like sparks through the stubble. Amen.