

On this All Saints' Day, at the close of our liturgy, we'll sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true, and we will recall that while one was a soldier, and one was a priest, and one was slain by a fierce wild beast, we also sing that "there's not any reason, no, not the least, why I shouldn't be one too."

But isn't becoming a saint a stretch for any of us?

If you ask the average Christian what that means, they will probably tell you that we remember and honor holy and extraordinary people, the luminaries, who have gone before us — most likely leaving behind them a trail of miracles and amazing acts of self-sacrifice, suffering, heroism and the like. At least this is what you would probably hear.

Another possible (though cynical) definition of a saint might be, "A dead sinner, revised and edited."<sup>1</sup> I think if we knew the truth of the saint's life, we would find a truth more complicated and less holy than the legend.

But both of these are narrow definitions of sainthood. Being a "saint" has nothing to do with being special or holy or different. Sainthood isn't the result of revisionist history, or wishful, rose-tinted impressions of what would-a been lived, could-a been lived, should-a been lived. Sainthood is, about being faithful — no matter what.

When we look for saints, we find that their lives are complicated. For instance, hailed in her lifetime as a living saint, some were troubled to learn that Mother Teresa of Calcutta had told her spiritual director that she spent most of the years of her ministry in deep doubt, including about the existence of God. This was discovered through sixty-six years of correspondence between Mother Teresa and her spiritual confidants which came to light after her death. The publication of the correspondence was not intended to mar her international reputation; those seeking her sainthood wanted to present the nun as she really was, serious doubts and all.

In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, Teresa proclaimed to the world that she accepted the award in the name of the poor, stating, "through this award and through all of us gathered here together, we are wanting to proclaim the good news to the poor that God loves them, that we love them, that they are somebody to us, that they too have been created by the same loving hand of God, to love and to be loved." This was very much like Jesus. Yet months earlier, she wrote a confidant, "Jesus has a very special love for you, [but] as for me, the silence and emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." To accept Mother

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<sup>1</sup> Ambrose Bierce in *The Cynic's Word Book*.

Teresa as a saint is to take her doubts and all the rest as one who loved the poor as Jesus taught, even when she didn't feel God's presence.

The early church, having survived over 300 years of persecution, wanted to remember and celebrate those Christians who had remained faithful in spite of the fear, the hostility and the very real danger of their witness to Christ. So they allocated a special day to honor all those who had endured and persevered during those violent times. My hunch is that the vast majority of these early saints were ordinary folks who were probably scared out of their wits, but hung in there because of their faith.

Of course, in those early times, many Christians suffered horrendous deaths and were burnt, crucified, eaten by lions, died in dungeons, etc. Others attained feats of endurance or performed miraculous deeds. But the average Christian "Joe" (who, because they have gone before us, we now call a saint) probably hunkered down and prayed to get through the traumas of the time without losing faith.

This, in itself, is heroic. And we are fortunate to catch a glimpse of the light that Christ shined in their hearts.

Our generation is desperately in need of a renewed and authentic understanding of "All Saints." While physical persecution of Christians still exists in some parts of the world, there is another kind of challenge that calls for a courageous response from believers where we are – in our own context. The human race is facing a darkness that is pervasive and frightening. On all levels, our faith in God's presence and grace is being challenged — endless wars, climate change, rampant diseases, corporate power, political polarization, increasing poverty, and natural disaster. These, and a host of other scary realities, threaten to overwhelm us and quench the little bit of light that we have been desperately holding on to from one trauma to the next. We are, it seems to me, in the midst of a global "dark night."

Many, understandably, are withdrawing into helplessness, apathy, and defeat. But this is precisely the time for the saints to be remembered – for those who went before us, lighting our way. This is the time when our understanding of this celebration must sink in for the people of faith. We would do well to enter a wiser and deeper space.

**Being a saint is all about being rooted in Christ and staying firm and faithful in the midst of rancor, trauma, darkness.**

Being a saint in our times means being counter-cultural — seeing beyond and beneath the externals — knowing that, in spite of the fearful realities around us, the light of Christ is always

present in the heart of our chaos. As one writer put it, “Hopelessness adapts. Hope [on the other hand] resists.”<sup>2</sup>

Those of us who resist, those of us who stand over and against injustice, poverty, violence and diminishment of any kind – those of us who strive to be rooted in Christ — those of us who hold on to the Gospel values – we keep our company with the saints who have gone before. We dare to proclaim, as they have, in the face of fear and evil, disillusionment and cultural disease, that there is light in the darkness — that God is with us and will never leave us. Such a proclamation of faith in these times makes us, indeed, worthy to be called “Saints.”  
Singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen sang,

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in

Perhaps that snarky definition of a saint, “a dead sinner, revised and edited,” proves oddly accurate and soundly scriptural. All of us *are* sinners. Not one of us is pure. The same holds for the likes of Mother Teresa, though her doubts were not sin. We just know that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. What makes someone a saint is not that they are holy, but that God is holy. Every one of us in baptism is buried with Christ in his death to rise with him in resurrection. We are all called to be dead to sin and alive to God. We are all called to be saints—dead sinners revised and edited by the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus.

Jesus says, “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt” (Luke 6:27-29, NRSV).

We are to serve Christ by serving others, loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. We are to go out from our worship so nurtured by the presence of our Lord in Word and Sacrament that this community is changed, even in a small way, and the world with it. We don't do any of these actions in order to earn or deserve God's grace and love, which have already been given to us freely. Instead, we love our neighbors as ourselves in response to God's love, expecting nothing in return as God has given us everything.

There are many other dead sinners who need to know that God loves them as they are, but would like to work on revising and editing. That work of redemption will continue until that day when we, too, join the great cloud of witnesses

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<sup>2</sup> William Coffin

We don't define saints. God does.

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in

**8:30**

At the next service, we get to baptize baby Levi.

We will welcome him into the family of God, where we are all cracked and broken and imperfect. A family that seeks – through our brokenness – to reflect the light of Christ in a dark world. A family that hunkers down and keeps the faith when hard times come, a family that rejoices together and embodies hope and love and service and generosity ... shining the light of the Word made flesh into the cracks and crevasses of other broken and imperfect people. A family of saints, a great cloud of witnesses, who will love him, support him ... and who already love you and support you, and will be there for you ~ always.

**10:30**

In a moment, we get to baptize baby Levi.

Levi, welcome to the family of God, where we are all cracked and broken and imperfect. A family that seeks – through our brokenness - to reflect the light of Christ in a dark world. A family that hunkers down and keeps the faith when hard times come, a family that rejoices together and embodies hope and love and service and generosity ... shining the light of the Word made flesh into the cracks and crevasses of other broken and imperfect people. A family of saints, a great cloud of witnesses, who will love you, support you, uphold you and be there for you ~ always.