

On November 1, many churches all around the world celebrate All Saints Day. First celebrated in the West around the year 609 or 610, All Saints Day historically was a day when the church recognized her martyrs and saints. As time has gone on, Christianity becoming more and more accepted, martyrs have become fewer, but there are many people to recognize, so—who are they, all these saints? And, more importantly, what do they have to do with us?

As a child, with regular exposure to my strongly Catholic grandparents, I was fairly certain I knew who the saints were. The saints were the people on the yellowing cards that fell out of my grandmother's bible, or who were pressed into the charms she wore around her neck, or who were immortalized in stone sculptures surrounding her bird bath. My exposure to the saints in this way led me to believe only this: the saints were all men (except Mary, the mother of Jesus of course), they all lived a long time ago, and they all did amazing things that clearly I could never do because, well- I never saw a picture of a saint wearing "Jordache" jeans or a "Guess" brand t-shirt, so clearly no one had done anything saint-worthy in a really long time. To me, the saints weren't people to aspire to be like, rather they were virtually untouchable people who had lived perfect lives, which I knew I could never live.

So, imagine my surprise later in life, reading that actually, St. Paul (the author of many of our biblical letters) uses the word "saint" 44 times to refer to the people of the Church on Earth!<sup>1</sup> Paul is saying that actually, we are ALL saints.

The word in Greek for saints is "hagios" or "holy ones".

Me? A holy one? What in the world makes ME a holy one? What have I done to earn the title of saint? Who am I to be counted amongst people like Paul or Ignatius or John the Baptist?

Keith Whitmore, Assistant Bishop of Atlanta, explains it this way, "We are called saints because of God's continuing incarnate presence among his people; it is God who is intimately and fully holy, it is a God who came in the flesh, who still dwells in the midst of His people. That presence permeates the entire community of faith. What makes God's people holy is His presence, not our behavior that is often less than perfect. As we all know too well, humanity has far from reached perfection." What Whitmore is hinting at is that becoming a saint is less about our behavior, and more about how we respond to God's presence in our lives.

And so, if we do not make ourselves holy but God makes us holy, then in doubting our own holiness we are actually doubting God's ability to be present to us. Instead, we are assuming that the power in all of us that is decidedly not holy – our pettiness, impatience, anxiety, fear – is actually stronger than God's presence, than grace.

Our Gospel for today makes very clear one thing: God's presence is stronger than anything else, even death.

Today's gospel is not a story of heroic independence. It is not a "Pull yourselves up by your bootstraps" kind of reading. Lazarus is bound. He's dead. He does not raise himself. We have been conditioned to believe that through discipline and hard work, we can make ourselves holy. In

---

<sup>1</sup> Reference Whitmore for the number of times Paul uses the word "saint(s)", and the translation of hagios.

the gospel, we hear a resounding NO to this belief. Life with God – holiness – is God’s gift to us. It cannot be earned or deserved. If it could be either of those things, it is not a gift.

What our gospel does say is much better, which is why we call it good news.

Lazarus was dead, he was wrapped in cloth, death had its full grip on him. We all know our own version of that bondage. “Lazarus, come out,” Jesus calls to him. And out he comes. *Because something in Lazarus heard him.* That can only have happened, if there is something in Lazarus that *did not die*. And if several days in a tomb does not extinguish it, the message is that there is something within us that indeed *never can die*. The Taize community have made a chant of this magnificent truth: “Within our darkest night, you kindle the fire that never dies away, never dies away.”

Holiness is our gift from God. God is constantly renewing us, constantly present, drawing us out into our deepest, truest selves, into fuller lives and more complete loves. Holiness is hardly some unattainable status bestowed only on people who lived centuries ago. Holiness is all of us. It is you and it is me, and it is us. It is what makes us church. We are holy not because of what we do, but because God is enduringly present to us, and something in us, no matter how lost we are, will always hear God.

Like Lazarus, each of us has our own grave cloths, and our own tombs. Some of them, we recognize as binding us and holding us back, others we struggle to see because we are bound so entirely by them. Lazarus, remember, was bound so tightly, that Jesus called upon members of the gathered community to rally around and begin loosening the bindings for him.

Jesus calls to each of us: come out. Come out and be the person God lovingly created you to be. Come out from the death power that binds you; from anxiety, from fear, from complacency. Come out and live, and in so doing, help others in the community do the same. There is something in all of us that needs to hear this.

Paradoxically, our holiness takes deepest root when we realize we could never attain it on our own and that all of our efforts will never get us there, but rather that it is God’s gift. It begins with the belief that for God all things are possible, and that no sin or death has the final say.

Holiness is not setting out on a course to become something we are not. It is not striving to become one of those saints on my grandmother’s yellowing cards, but rather striving to become our holy selves. Holiness is accepting that we can never “become holy” on our own, because, in fact, we already are.