

Today we keep the great festival of All Saints. And the purpose of that festival in our calendar is to remind us that we are not alone. And that we are not ON our own. We have been preceded. And as we will experience later on in this service in our liturgy, we are surrounded. We are surrounded, in the imaginative prose of the book of Hebrews, by a great cloud of witnesses. And some of those people we have already read about.

In our reading of Ecclesiasticus this morning, we “sang the praises of famous men (and women), our ancestors in their generations.” We remembered public servants, academics, and musicians. We sang the praises of “rich men (and women) endowed in resources” – that ought to have been a comfortable reminder that wealth and resources themselves are not an obstacle in our relationship with God and one another, as long as they are put to the right use. But that’s another sermon for another day. But, remember that after we exchange the peace, as I have good reason to believe that we might be reminded of one such way to responsibly use our resources of time and wealth. We sang the praises of our parents, our siblings, and their parents and their siblings. Indeed, we sang the praises of all great saints.

But All Saints’ Day is about much more than singing the praises of the great founders of the church who have come before us. It is about more than remembering the martyrs who died for their faithful commitment to the Gospel. If we end our observance of this feast with reverent nods to the dead men and women memorialized in the stained glass of this sanctuary, if that is all we do on this day, All Saints’ Day, then we miss 2/3 of its purpose.

All Saints’ Day is not only about ages past, but of the here and now, and of the future. St. Paul speaks of the Saints as a “Great cloud of witnesses,” and that phrase is striking, because it requires us to ask, “what is it they are seeing, and from where do they have their view?” We are not alone, and we are not ON our own. It’s called the great cloud of witnesses, but I prefer to think of it as a great CROWD of onlookers.

Today’s epistle, the reading from Revelation, speaks of the “great multitude that no one could count” standing together, cheering on the kingdom of God. The figure is almost athletic. The way to think about it is this. All those who have finished the race, an often tiring and exhausting race, are in the stands, they’re in the galleries up there, watching us as we struggle along. And they are not watching us indifferently, they are cheering us on. They are encouraging us in the race. Go for it, they are saying. They have finished, but the race isn’t over, because we are still running it. So we, and they, are connected.

If you have ever been to a track meet, you note the connection between what’s going on around the track, and what’s going on in the stands. And the race isn’t over until the last runner has come through. So we are surrounded by a great crowd of people who have already been through it, but who are not finished until we are. And that is the point to be remembered. They are not finished until we are. We are not alone, and we are not on our own.

As I was preparing this sermon, I was flipping through the Book of Common Prayer for some direction. In the back, in a section called “the Catechism” is a set of questions and answers, a modern-day “FAQ” if you will. And I was pleased to find my question had been asked and answered.

Q: “What is the communion of saints?”

A: “The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.”

This is the good news of the Gospel, for it recognizes the reality of the world in which we live. It acknowledges the realities of love and of hurt. But more than just acknowledging these realities, it preaches the reality of unity. No amount of division in this life can break down the unity of the family of God, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise. That is, nothing we do or experience, regardless of how bad it seems in the moment, can break the reality of Christ’s love for us.

That is what it means to be family. There will be times when we're poor in spirit. There will be times when we mourn. There will be times when we hunger and thirst. And in those times, we will certainly need support and encouragement. We will need to be reminded that, no matter how divided we may seem, no matter how alone we may feel, that with the communion of saints, we are the family of God, bound together in something much greater than ourselves, and held together by one much greater than our totality.

That is why the stands are full of those cheering onlookers. Though they may be done running, the race is not over. And that is why today, we take our place in the stands of this stadium, to cheer on those who will join us in this race.