

November 2, 2014 / All Saints and All Souls / David L. Edwards

Surrounded by Witnesses and Saints

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

...to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours...

Hebrews 1:1-2, 7, 11-4

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...

Paul writes to the community at Corinth that they are called to be saints. The word he uses (*hagios*) means those set apart by God, or who devote themselves to God. Paul believes that all who commit themselves to following Jesus, thus to the life of God's love, are *de facto* saints...even the troublesome bunch at Corinth! It's just that Paul needed to remind them that they were also called to be saints, that is, they needed to act like the saints they were. Christians not acting like Christians is nothing new!

In our scriptures, there is no such thing as the "saint system" that developed in later centuries. Saints are not spiritual superstars. They are ordinary people devoting themselves to a spiritual path of the loving service of God and others, and, today we must add, of the earth as the good creation of God. Celtic Christianity speaks of "thin places" where one has a palpable sense of the Holy. People who come onto this property, and we ourselves, experience it as a "thin place". I think there are also "thin people", and I don't mean in the weight-watchers sense! There are those in and through whom we experience something of the holiness, the sacredness, of life and of our own lives. By the ways they live and the wisdom, sensitivity, simple kindness, or deep commitment they have, they help us to touch the same in ourselves. These are saints.

One of my saints has felt very close to me in recent days. His name is Ricky Appling. I knew him over forty years ago, when I was working as an orderly at Boston Children's Hospital Medical Center. I was the only male on the nursing staff of the cardiac division, so I was assigned mostly male patients, and the challenging ones at that...like Ricky. He was a hefty African American kid, about 12 years old, with Down Syndrome, and he was a challenge. Nothing came easily with Ricky. Every morning he resisted my taking his vital signs. He refused to get out of bed, so I had to learn how to change his linens with him in the bed. One day, when I was to take him to X-ray, he got

wind of it and lodged himself under the sink in the bathroom. It took half an hour of coaxing, pleading, and promising, to finally get him into the wheelchair.

The breakthrough in my efforts to “connect” with Ricky came one day when I entered his room for the morning routines. I carried my stethoscope shoved into my right hip pocket. There sat Ricky, as usual, in the middle of the bed, legs crossed in front of him, like a Buddha with an mischievous attitude. As I rounded the bed, he reached out and snatched my stethoscope, holding it behind his back, grinning with delight. We had finally made it, Ricky and I!

In good weather, I would take Ricky out to the hospital garden where he looked intently at everything his eyes fell upon--an azalea blossom, the shiny cellophane of a crumpled cigarette package he found lying on the ground, and one day when some musicians were playing, Ricky made me wheel him close to the upright bass player, so he could touch the instrument, the music.

The day Ricky was scheduled for open-heart surgery, I arrived at the hospital a little before three, for the second shift. As I got off the elevator, I was met by Joan, the charge nurse. She wanted to be the one to tell me that Ricky had died on the operating table. She ushered me into the conference room, telling me to take as long as I needed before coming onto the floor.

Ricky is one of my saints. He opened my life in a way that led me close to that “place” Jesus spoke of when he said that the kingdom of God belongs to children and those who become like them. Joan is one of my saints, and the other nurses, who showed me what compassion and caring look like when combined with discipline and commitment. When we take time to remember and be aware, we will begin to see that our lives have been flooded with saints.

Last Sunday Kaye spoke of the importance of imagination to our lives and our faith. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews invites us to imagine that we are surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses”. Imagining is not “make believe”. It is not pretending. It is seeing beyond and through appearances, the surface things. It is becoming aware of the sacredness that is all around us, and in us. The surrounding cloud of witnesses is part of that sacred dimension. It is all of those we have known, or not known, who have lived as saints, whose lives have “born witness” to what is good and holy and beautiful, what is just and kind and peaceful. Some follow the Christian path, some other spiritual paths, some no overtly religious or spiritual path. That Ricky is one of my saints has nothing to do with religion, but that he lived in that realm Jesus called the kingdom or reign of God. He lived with openness, purity of heart, and complete presence. And he showed it to me and helped me touch it in myself. It became, if you will, our “shared space”.

A “cloud of witnesses”. The word witness here is that from which we get the word “martyr” (*marturios*). The writer of Hebrews has just recounted the history of “witnesses” in his spiritual tradition, some known, like Abraham and Moses, many unknown. All of them lived “by faith”, says the writer, and many suffered for it. In the New Testament, a witness is one who lives

a certain way, like the saint, whose life is devoted to the sacredness of life, to God, and to the service of others and the world, responding to God's call and leading, even when it brings them into suffering. A witness, like the saint, is one who has helped us, by their lives, to live by faith.

The writer uses the same word for cloud (*nephos*) that is used in the story of Jesus' transfiguration (Matt. 17). There God's presence is imagined as a cloud, out of which God speaks to confirm to the disciples that Jesus is the one they need to listen to. In Hebrews, the cloud is the presence with us of those who have gone before us, who still help us in the journey of our lives, the journey into the love of God and the service of others and the world. The writer wants us to know that we are far from alone. The writer knows that each of us has to live our own lives, find our own "sainthood", our own holiness, and bear witness to what is good and true within our uniqueness, callings, and gifts. Yet we can draw encouragement and strength from those who have gone before us. They are very near us in a very real way, a community that is not broken by what we experience as death. In the computer world these days, there is something called "the cloud", which I don't understand, but which conjures up images of amassed sharing of technology "out there" in the internet sphere. Well, there is another "cloud", one that I say is more real, more relevant, and more crucial to our living as human beings. It is the "cloud" of the spirit, energy, presence of all through the centuries who have devoted themselves to what is good, loving, just, true, and beautiful.

This cloud of witnesses, this community of saints, encourages us, in the writer's words, to "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us...." To me this speaks of the work of our inward journey in relation to our outward journey. It is the awareness and self-understanding we gain through our times of silence, reflection, study, and prayer. We see where we are carrying baggage that we need to, and can, put down in order to live the truly care-free life Jesus talked about, the dropping of anxiousness and the increase of our trust of God (Matt. 6:25-34). Another translation of this sentence puts it this way: "...and the sin that so easily distracts us." I am glad the writer did not spell out particular weights and distractions, but leaves it to each of us to discern for ourselves the things that keep us from full, free, loving, and generous lives. Our commitment to and work with our spiritual disciplines or practices enables us to discern and lay aside the weights and distractions that weigh us down, that keep us from living as we were created to live. This inward work frees us for a more loving, generous, and courageous outward journey of service to others and the world.

How does Jesus fit into all this? The writer says he is the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith", the one who goes before us blazing the trail for us to follow. I find this the most meaningful, relevant, and helpful of all the images of Jesus in scripture. Jesus is the main

“witness”, or in the words of Paul, the main “saint”. He is not a super-human figure, but a human being like us whose faithfulness was perfect. The word used here (*telos*) does not mean perfect in the sense we usually think of--never making any mistakes, always doing the right thing, always successful. What an oppressive weight and distraction that idea of perfection is! The word means “complete” or “fulfilled”, or “end” in the sense of maturity or, to use an agricultural term, “ripeness”. Jesus goes before us, showing the way—how it’s done, what it looks like--not doing it for us but calling and empowering us to follow.

Finally, I included the writer’s words about “discipline”, because that word is so important in our life as a community. It, too, can be misunderstood. Discipline really has nothing to do with punishment or with rigid and cold obedience to rules. The word used here (*paideuo*) has a variety of meanings--instruction, training, teaching. The writer speaks of God’s “disciplining” us as a parent “disciplines”, or teaches or guides, a child. This passage cannot be used to justify hitting a child, by the way. Or to support the notion of a God “up there” who punishes us at will. No. This is far more serious than that, more real. What the writer is saying is that we can experience all the things in our lives, including the painful and difficult events, as teachers. Isn’t that a wonderful way of understanding? Instead of trying to avoid or just endure the difficult things that come to us, we can learn from them. God who is everywhere present is also in those painful, challenging experiences, so that they can become sources of growth and depth and perfection, that is, maturing, in our journey of life and faith. Kaye’s sermon last week was a testimony to what the writer is saying, as she shared the “discipline”, the teaching and the learning, of the stroke she experienced. When we live all the experiences of our lives with this kind of openness, this kind of faith, they become our teachers. They strengthen us, make us wiser, kinder, more committed to what is good and true and loving.

So, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says that, since we are surrounded by this multitude of saints and witnesses, since we can look to Jesus who goes before us, showing the way of our true humanity, since God’s presence and guidance and teaching are in every experience of our lives...therefore we can lift our drooping hands, strengthen our weak knees, make a straight path for our feet so that whatever is wounded or injured in us is not worsened but made stronger, healthier. No matter what condition we are in, no matter what the situations we are in or have to face, we have everything we need to live the lives God created us to live.