

Who Are God's Saints?
The Rev. Amy Spagna
November 6, 2022 – All Saints' Sunday (Observed)
Ephesians 1:11-23

*I sing a song of the saints of God,
patient and brave and true,
who toiled and fought and lived and died
for the Lord they loved and knew.
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
and one was shepherdess on the green:
they were all of them saints of God,
and I mean, God helping, to be one too.¹*

The text of this hymn, which nearly every organist I know dislikes (sorry, Jim!), is part of a small collection titled *Everyday Hymns for Little Children*. It was published in 1929 by a young British mother named Lesbia Scott, who had written them for her own family. When the text made its way across the Atlantic, it was paired with a new tune and incorporated into the 1940 Hymnal. Believe it or not, there's a strong Vermont connection with it. Its writer was John Henry Hopkins, a grandson and namesake of Vermont's first bishop, and he named the tune for his retirement home on Grand Isle.² It doesn't make any really profound theological statements like the others we are singing

¹ Lesbia Scott, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God." GRAND ISLE. 293, *The Hymnal 1982*.

² "I Sing A Song of the Saints of God." Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Sing_a_Song_of_the_Saints_of_God [accessed November 3, 2022].

today does, but it does remind us that God's saints can be found everywhere, and can be anyone – perhaps even us someday!

That's the point of this feast day, which is dedicated to remembering and celebrating the faithful who have come before us in setting their hopes on Christ and believing the gospel of salvation. These saints were, and are, the Church, just as much as we are right now, and the generations to come will be. Whenever we gather to pray and break bread, we do it together with them. The images of James and so many others contained in the stained glass are the most tangible reminders of that, as are the ancient words we will say over the bread and wine. I don't know about you, but in those moments, I can sometimes sense their presence here, joining their voices with ours and the rest of the heavenly chorus in praise of the God who created it all.

The Letter to the Ephesians is one of the earliest Christian writings to suggest that God's saints are always present with us. Scholars disagree on whether Paul actually wrote the letter himself, or one of his closest assistants wrote it in his name. Regardless of who the author was, it has quite a lot to say about the place of the Church and its people. It's not just "the Body of Christ" as 1 Corinthians famously suggests. Instead, this idea has been pushed out a little further in how it places "all things under his feet" and making Christ "the head over all things for the church" (Eph. 1:22-23, NRSV). One commenter on this text reminds us that this is all God's doing – as is the enabling of the saints to "remember the riches of his glorious inheritance... and live in such a way that is worthy of that high calling... With Christ as the 'head,' the

church... is called on to represent the Christ figure in the world..."³ We aren't given a whole lot of concrete suggestions about what the Church will do in that capacity, other than remembering where its authority actually comes from. IT belongs to Christ alone, and as such it resides in spaces that are well beyond those occupied by any earthly power or principality. And it is from those regions beyond that, "the church must find its stability, so that Christ's 'wisdom and revelation' might flow through it."⁴

It's a tough job, one which is doable only because of the presence of the Holy Spirit among all believers. It is given to us in baptism when we are "sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." It is the bedrock of all we say and do, not only in this space but also when we speak and act out in the world. "[This task], however, should not be seen merely in terms of a marked for future delivery stamp... it is not to be shelved away in a storage unit until their eschatological pick-up date. This is why... the Christian life is represented... as living in the Spirit... [It] guides us to produce fruits of justice and righteousness, which are the marks of a true Christian."⁵

But what exactly makes someone who exhibits these essential gifts a saint?

That probably depends on who you talk to and what day of the week it is.

Historically, it's been a matter of martyrdom, doing great things on behalf of the Church, living lives dedicated to service, or some doing some other great deeds of power in

³ Emerson Powery, "Commentary on Ephesians 1:11-23."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionar/all-saints-day-2/commentary-on-ephesians-111-23-4> [accessed October 31, 2022].

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sammy Alfaro, "Commentary on Ephesians 1:11-23."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/all-saints-day-2/commentary-on-ephesians-111-23-2> [accessed October 31, 2022].

Christ's name. But those things aren't required, strictly speaking. A lived faith is all it takes. That's what Abraham Stearns and his co-founders had in mind when they established this parish. They believed they were called to do, and be, something different in the context of this town. And that has not changed at all in the nearly 200 years since the first services were held on this site. We too are called to do and be something different, different from the pettiness, hate, bad information, and paranoid suspiciousness which are so much a part of the landscape right now. Our call is to be like the saints: steadfast in faith, and knowing both the hope to which Christ has called us and the immeasurable greatness of Christ's power for those who believe. There are absolutely no restrictions on who can take this task on. Faith is all that's needed, and that doesn't require fancy graduate degrees or years of on-the-job training to acquire. It only takes living as if the things Jesus said and did still matter. Sometimes, it means we have to stick our necks out on behalf of our neighbors. But most of the time, we do it in the ordinary, everyday places – and it is also in these ordinary places where God's saints can most often be found. As the hymn text says:

*You can meet them in school,
or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in school,
or in shops, or at tea,
for the saints of God are folk just like me,
and I mean to be one too.⁶*

⁶ Scott, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God."