

# All Saints Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran church

Vicar Paul Eldred

November 6, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate one of my favorite days in the church year – All Saints Sunday. This is also one of the oldest festivals in our calendar meaning that for more than a millennia, Christians have gathered together at the beginning of November to remember all the saints that have gone before us. And we all know names of saints that the church remembers – their names adorn cities and hospitals and congregations. We read about them in the Bible or church histories. So to kick off this remembrance, I would invite you to shout out some of the names of saints that you know.

We often think of saints as paragons of virtue or some perfect person we should try to emulate – people we can only hope to follow in their holiness. We think that to be a saint, one must be as humble and generous as Saint Francis or as prolific in writing and missionary work as Saint Paul or be as faithful and virtuous as Saint Mary the Mother of our Lord. We think that sainthood is reserved for those who have lived their lives in such a way as to be separated from the rest of us regular people.

But as heirs of the Reformation, we Lutherans have a more expansive definition of what it means to be a saint. We understand sainthood to be not just what a person does in their life, but what God has done in their lives. Lutherans understand all Christians to be saints through the virtue of their baptism – that in those waters, God claims us as God’s own and blesses us with love and mercy and declares us to be righteous. We believe that each Christian is simultaneously both a saint and a sinner – someone who struggles with sin in our lives but whom God has made holy. That through our baptism, we are all made saints of God, imperfect though we may be. And living into our vocation as baptized Christians, we can inspire those around us through our love, our good works, or our journey to be better Christ-followers. And Jesus expands our list even further when he calls the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the hated blessed and names them as saints of God. The same people that the world rejected or forgot as insignificant or ordinary are blessed and favored by God. The same people politicians ignore or vilify are highlighted as God’s beloved people.

And so I want you to think again – who are the saints who have impacted you in your life? Who are the saints that have loved you and taught you to love? Who are the saints that have inspired you to do good in the world? Who are the saints whose examples of faithful living you remember with thanksgiving this All Saints Day?

This weekend, I had the opportunity to attend a conference at my seminary about natural burial. It was a fascinating weekend and I loved all the perspectives and voices that I heard. But one of conversations that resonated most deeply with me was with a Latina Episcopal priest

who was talking about Latinx views of death and burial. She described how in many Latin American cultures, understandings of life and death are intimately connected and the people have a sense of continuing to be in relationship with loved ones who have died before them. She talked about how many Latinx homes will have commemorative shrines to deceased ancestors and saints – much like the one we have this morning commemorating the saints of Wicker Park Lutheran Church who we remember today. We also talked about *Día de Muertos*, the Day of the Dead, where Mexicans gather to pray for and remember their loved ones who have died. She described it as what the Celtic Christians might call a “thin space,” a time where the veil between the dead and the living seems especially permeable and people can be in communion with their family and friends again.

When I was hearing about his beautiful ritual of communing with the ancestors, I was struck that November 2, the last Day of the Dead, was a day of mystical communion throughout Chicago as well. The Cubs’ miraculous win in Game 7 of the World Series united this city to cheer for a single team – and the energy was electric. Diehard sports fans and bandwagoners, young and old, Cubs fans and Sox fans all united to cheer on the boys in blue in their quest to finally break the curse of that Billy goat. But after the Cubs won, it soon became clear to me that this was all even bigger than I initially realized. I heard stories of feelings of intimate connection to relatives who were long passed. I heard about the man who drove over 650 miles to listen to the final game at the grave of his dead father. Or how the façade of Wrigley Field quickly became a shrine to the countless fans that died before they

could see the Cubs win another title as family members chalked the names of loved ones on the brick walls. The city has been caught up in the memories of those who waited these 108 years and who many believe are now celebrating with the other Cubs fans in the next life. This palpable sense of this mystic communion with the departed has been unlike anything I have ever experienced before. It's as if all of Chicago has been experiencing a thin space these last few days.

And yet, we as Christians believe that we experience this type of thin space every time we gather around this table for Holy Communion. When we pray over the bread and the wine in a few minutes, we will hear Pastor Jason say that we unite our prayers with those of all the saints. We believe that in that holy meal, we join the saints of all time and all places in a mystical communion at the Lord's Table. So it seems appropriate that our remembrance table of our saints of Wicker Park Lutheran Church is right next to our table of Holy Communion to remind us of our loved ones who we join today at Christ's table. Who that even though we cannot see them in the flesh, we trust that we can join them in praise and thanksgiving to our God who has redeemed us all and declared us to be holy and blessed saints. And though we live imperfect and ordinary lives, we have the hope that we are and will be united with all the saints in glory through the love of Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.