

All Saints Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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November 5th, 2017

On Thursday the seniors at LSTC threw a Halloween party. We decided to hold it on such a late date due to scheduling conflicts and to take advantage of half-price candy and decorations. As a shout-out to the Reformation, the costume theme was saints and sinners.

After googling “weird saints”, I decided to go as St. Barbara, the patron saint of people who work with explosions. The costume mostly involved wearing a very sparkly orange tiara, and a dress covered in construction paper fireworks.

But in my extensive Wikipedia research, I learned a lot about this saint. Her father locked her in a tower for most of her life, she converted to Christianity, her father got mad, she was tortured, but somehow always healed from the wounds, and then she was beheaded. On his way home, her father was struck by lightning, which is why she is associated with explosions.

This research reinforced the way the church has traditionally talked about saints. They are amazingly good, perfect even. They patiently and uncomplainingly bear ordeals and torture for the sake of the Gospel. They are pure and loving and depicted in paintings with expressions of utter peace.

Even though the Lutheran Church doesn't venerate or honor the same saints the way other denominations do, we still use expressions like, “oh, they're such a saint” when someone does something selfless.

And when I think of the saints who have gone before us, I have this picture in my mind from our reading from Revelation, all these good and beautiful people robed in white, standing around God's throne to worship. Peacemakers, those who have worked tirelessly for justice, the meek, the pure in heart.

And the more this picture is in my mind, **the less I can see myself standing there too.** If the saints are the super stars of the faith, where do the rest of us normal people stand? You know, those of us who get road rage and have mean thoughts about people and buy Halloween decorations we don't need even though it's bad for the planet. Those of us who try so hard to look like we've got it all together, but usually just don't. Those of us who struggle with doubt and fear and feelings of unworthiness. I wonder if there's a place for us in the gathering of the saints.

But then I think of a man we'll call Mark. He passed away and my campus pastor was asked to lead his memorial service. My pastor had never met Mark, so he gathered Mark's grown children to plan out the service and start to learn a little about him so he could preach the sermon. The family was all pretty quiet, only briefly mentioning hobbies, or a couple important dates. Until one son just couldn't take it anymore. "You know what," he said, "Dad was kind of a jerk. He never treated us right, he had anger issues, and I don't really have too many good things to say about him."

That opened the floodgates for his siblings as they also shared grievances about this man that they loved but also had been in conflict with for a long time. They shared story after story and the pastor began to wonder what on earth he would preach at the memorial service. He didn't want to speak ill of the dead, but to preach a generic sermon about how great Mark was and how much everyone would miss him would be a disservice to his children.

In the end he decided to tell the truth. The truth about Mark, but more importantly, the truth about God – a God who calls us all children, **not because we are lovable but because God is loving.**

My pastor preached a sermon that claimed God's promises for Mark and for all of us – promises of love and salvation and life eternal – not based on any merit of our own but entirely on God's goodness. Promises that were made at our baptism and are kept by our steadfast God, promises that we can stake our lives on. Beloved, we are God's children now.

Today we remember the saints who have gone before us, especially those who have passed away in the past year. Some are easier to honor than others. But we remember them all:

The ones we love and the ones we wish had loved us better

The ones we cherish and the ones we're ready to forget and the ones we never knew at all

All of them held by the embrace of an eternally loving God, all sanctified by the blood of the lamb, all joyfully welcomed into the kingdom of heaven.

Today we also celebrate the saints who are still here on Earth, the entire body of Christ, all of us gathered here. We are saints and we are sinners, people who try to follow God and often fail, who work for justice but also unwittingly contribute to injustice,

the poor in spirit and the over-consumers;

the meek and the aggressive;

those who hunger for righteousness and those caught in systemic sin;

the merciful and the vengeful;

the pure in heart and the corrupt;

the peacemakers and the warmongers.

And every single person in between. All of us caught up in the amazing and life-giving power of God's love. And now maybe we can look closer at the crowd gathered around God's throne and see beyond the pure-white robes – to see people just like us. Sinners. Saints. Beloved children of God. Thanks be to God.