

# The Communion of Saints

*A Sermon for All Saints' Day*

*November 1, 2020*

*The Rev. Alissa G. Anderson*

*St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Plant City, Florida*

I hope you all enjoyed the holy day of Halloween yesterday! What's that? You don't see how costumes and candy connect to church? Halloween is a bit too witchy for Jesus?

Even in the name we have a clue: have you seen Halloween written with an apostrophe between the Es? That's because it's short for Halloweven, or All Hallows' Eve. Halloween is, simply, the Eve of All Saints' Day.

All Saints' Day traditionally is a day to celebrate the martyrs and other heroes of our faith recognized by the church—those who, in Godly Play terms, came so close to God and God came so close to them that they knew what God wanted them to do.

But there's another layer in which sainthood is not limited to those the church deems worthy. We are all sinner and saint, and we are all part of that mystical body of believers past, present, and future. All Souls' Day, of The Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed is a separate holy day—and at St. Peter's we'll actually be having a separate service this evening—but in many respects the two days have been melding together for a long time.

Today we celebrate all the saints—those held up as heroes of the faith by the church, and those we love and see no longer, and every sinning saint in a pew or watching a video stream. As part of this celebration, I want to highlight and hold up a particular idea or term: the "Communion of Saints."

You've heard it before; it's in the Apostles' Creed, the creed we recited during our long stretch of Morning Prayer Sundays. But what does it mean? The Communion of Saints refers to the understanding that God's love and the bonds of community are stronger than any other power—even death. The Communion of Saints refers to our connection, our mystical union, even, with Christ-followers near and far, and with those who have crossed into the nearer presence of God and are no longer here with us. We are all knit together in Communion.

This week I encountered a passage from Lutheran pastor Berthold Von Schenk's 1940s book *The Presence – An Approach to the Holy Communion*. In a chapter titled "Our Saints," he writes, "When we are deprived of loved ones, it is a tremendous shock. For the time we are stunned. Not everyone can feel at once their continuing companionship. We should not for that reason despair. An adjustment must take place in our lives – reaching deep into our habits, emotions and thoughts." That adjustment is recognizing that we continue to be in full communion with all the saints, even when those we love are lost to us.

I think in recent months we've really realized, really felt the need for community and Communion. We've felt, in a sudden rush, the pain of sudden and extended separation from our communities. Those who've experienced greater losses during this time have perhaps felt this pain even more acutely. We are designed to be in community, and when community feels broken, we feel broken.

This day, though, makes explicit the real power of community and Communion, of the bonds that even death cannot loose.

One of our readings for All Saints' Day comes from Revelation. It might sound familiar; it's one of the options for funeral texts. And with good reason, for here we have a glimpse into heavenly worship—which is not wholly different or foreign to our worship.

Seeking and finding the presence of the living God can remind us of the presence and love of the saints—ours and beyond. These saints are with God; and through God their stories continue. They worship God face-to-face, surrounded by saints and angels. We worship God from here—and yet this is a thin place, a place where God comes near to us, where we can draw near to God; where we can remember we are worshipping in the communion of the saints.

I think of "The Dancing Saints," an icon in St. Gregory is Nyssa in San Francisco. Wrapping the high walls, a community of saints, from traditional to nontraditional, link arms in a heavenly dance. As parishioners gather and worship below, the saints dance above their heads—and in speaking with Deacon Ray, I learned that the congregants, too, do a dance of a sort in the service.

We may not dance at St. Peter's, but we, too, are surrounded by saints, shining through our beautiful windows with the light of the Spirit. We worship in the company of all the saints.

When we gather for Communion, this is participation in the Communion of Saints. We are linked, in this act, to Christians around the world, but not only that. This table is where God invites us to feast, to draw near, to be close to God. And in doing that, we are brought close to, woven into, the Communion of Saints.

In the Eucharistic prayer (though—and this is on me—not the one we're using on this feast day), we join our voices with "all the company of heaven"—the angels and archangels, the saints, those we love who are now with God. Communion links us to God, to Christ, to one another, and it also links us to the heavenly realm, to the saints in light.

All Saints' Day reminds us of this communion, places us into that place of connection. It reminds us of where we should be standing—at the altar; or, in these times, in your pews. Part of being in this communion means standing with others as well. Jesus makes this clear in this morning's gospel, Matthew's beatitudes.

Jesuit author Greg Boyle says that the beatitudes “is not a spirituality, it’s a geography.” The word translated “blessed,” or sometimes “happy,” might more precisely be neither “blessed” nor “happy” but “you’re in the right place.”

You’re in the right place if you’re merciful. You’re in the right place if you fight for justice and peace. You’re in the right place if you stand with the mourning, the poor, the meek. You’re in the right place if you’re living the Gospel boldly enough to push you and others out of tightly drawn comfort zones.

This is not easy to hear, and it’s harder still to do. It can be tempting to believe that the Gospel way leads to prosperity and safety, but *really living* the Gospel leads to crucifixion—and to resurrection, yes, but we must have Good Friday before we get to Easter. Living the Gospel means sacrificing our own comfort for the good of others. It means aligning ourselves with those society rejects. It means swallowing our pride. It probably means making people uncomfortable or even angry.

This is difficult work. Fortunately, we don’t do it alone. We do the work of the Gospel from within the Communion of Saints, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, met together at God’s table. Saints in this room, saints abroad, saints above. Our connection is our strength, is the strength of God in us, and this strength helps us to do the work that builds the kingdom of God and brings heaven down to earth.

Happy All Saints’ Day!