
Pastor Beate Chun – St. Francis Lutheran Church, San Francisco, California

Date: November 2, 2014
Sunday: All Saints Sunday
Text: Revelation 7:9–17
Theme: From Every Tribe and Nation

Grace to you and peace—from the One who is, and the One who was, and the One who is to come.

There are voices shouting at the baptismal font, “Welcome back!” What are these voices? Why are they shouting, “Welcome back!” and why at the baptismal font?

The voices come from the multitude of saints, a great cloud of witnesses, the Bible calls them. A great multitude, the book of Revelation says (we read that in our first reading, remember?), a great multitude from every tribe and people and language. But who are they? What do we mean when we talk about saints?

The title saint actually means many different things. In the early church all the believers were called saints. Whenever the apostle Paul wrote a letter to a church in another city, he began his letter like this: to the saints who are in Rome, to the saints who are in Philippi, to the saints who are in Colossi, and so forth. So in the early church, a saint was simply a church member. And if you want to shake the hand of a saint, just turn to the neighbor in your pew. “Hello saint!” And, of course, that means you get to count yourself among the saints.

Now, there is another meaning of saint. Namely all those who have gone before us, all those who have died and now rest in the arms of God. My father, my uncle, my grandparents. And all the members and friends we have laid to rest in our Memorial Terrace. We will take time later in the service and remember them in a special way.

And then there are the Saints with a capital S. Traditionally, those are people who led some rather unusual lives—in some ways, even eccentric lives. There is, for example, Saint Lucy who cut out her own eyes and put them on a plate, just to cool the passions of a suitor. Saint Wilfreda cut off her hand for similar reasons. St. Agatha had her breasts cut off. St. Appolonia had all her teeth knocked out. St. Denis had his head chopped off. According to legend, he then picked up his chopped-off head, tucked it under his arm and walked several miles while preaching. The list of these gruesome and weird stories could go on and on. I am not reciting them in order to make you sick, but rather to give you a hint that no one ever sets out to become a Saint with a capital S.

Instead people are called “Saints” with a capital S, because others have been moved and inspired by their stories. And so, we have modern day Saints as well. Because there are still people who move us and inspire us, right? Possible examples include:

- Mahatma Gandhi, who worked for peace and reconciliation between Muslims and Hindus,
- Ida B. Wells, the African-American journalist who documented the lynchings in the United States,
- Eleanor Roosevelt, who used her access to power to promote justice and dignity, especially for women and the poor, and

- Cesar Chavez, the son of Mexican migrants who devoted his life to organizing farm workers.

These modern saints include musicians, artists, scholars, political activists, missionaries, writers, dancers, teachers, protesters, rich and poor. Some of them have never spoken the name of Jesus, yet their lives make them part of the saints, whether they know it or not.

Our congregation recently had a booth at the Castro Street Fair. Among the handouts and display items we had an icon depicting Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician and City Supervisor of San Francisco. He is depicted holding a candle because he always tried to bring light to the oppressed. He is also shown wearing a black armband with a pink triangle. One of the passersby who stopped at our booth and saw the Harvey Milk icon became quite upset. How dare we make him into a saint! The answer is, of course, simply he is a saint, because he is a saint for us, he inspires us by his life and example, just as other saints in history have inspired us.

How about you? Do you have a favorite saint? Is there someone who inspires you, someone who shines a guiding light into your life? Well, no matter how you define them, saints are all around us. They sit next to us in the pews and on the bus, but they also shine their bright light from beyond the distant and not so distant past.

A great cloud of witnesses, the Bible calls them, from every tribe and people and language. It is a vision that is all inclusive and all encompassing. And this great cloud is calling to us this morning from the baptismal font! Why the baptismal font? Because it is in our baptism that we become one with Christ, and it is in our baptism that we become one with this big company of saints. And so, whenever we approach the baptismal font, we can imagine this great multitude of saints, this multitude of men and women, from every age, from every tribe, from every language calling out to us, rejoicing over us, cheering us on.

For Halloween I had a gadget, a darling little ghost activated by a motion detector, so that whenever someone came near the house, it started to howl and shriek. Now think of the baptismal font like that gadget, a furnishing that has a motion detector and whenever we come near it, the saints are calling out to us and rejoicing over us. Fortunately, most of the time they do that very quietly, which is a good thing, because sometimes, some of us arrive at worship a little late, and the common strategy is usually to sneak in very quietly. But that, of course, would not work if the saints made so much noise every time we passed the baptismal font.

Finally, there is one more thing that happens, or should happen when we pass the baptismal font. The font reminds us that we, too, are saints. And we too, have a baptismal vocation. We, too, have been given a light, a light which we are meant to shine for others. In fact, whenever we celebrate a baptism, we light a candle and say, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven."

And so, on this All Saints Sunday, we join believers all around the world to give thanks for all the saints—the saints above us, the saints beside us, the saints before us, the saints among us. We can honor these saints and all our departed loved ones. We can honor them not just by remembering them, but even more so by letting our own light shine as brightly as we can—a light of justice and mercy and truth in the world. And in this way we honor the saints and give glory and thanks to God in heaven.

Amen.