

All Saints' Sunday

November 5, 2023

Joshua 3:7-17

Psalms 107:1-7, 33-37

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

You've probably noticed that it's All Saints' Sunday, a day when we remember all of the saints, and we celebrate what we call "the great cloud of witnesses" that is the communion of saints. The communion of saints, then, is the whole family of God—the whole Church—both living and dead, that we are always in community with. We're in community with them through prayer, through the sacraments, and through our shared praise of God.

And a saint is not only the people that might come immediately to mind when we think of saints, maybe—St. Paul, St. Francis, St. Anne—no, a saint is a faithful Christian, a saint is a person who shares a life in Christ. So we are all saints. St. Paul even addresses some of his letters to saints or those called to be saints, so we know that this is an ancient way of referring to the members of the Church. And the celebration of All Saints' Day as a feast day in the western Church dates from at least the ninth century. And it's a traditional day for baptisms, because in baptism we welcome people into the Church—we create new saints.

Today we're going to be baptizing two baby boys: Mikey and Charlie. We are doing this as part of a regular Sunday service because doing that emphasizes to everyone the central part that baptism plays in being a Christian. It also reinforces the reality that the baptized person is being incorporated into the Body of Christ which is the Church. For us baptism is *not* only about a person's personal acceptance of Jesus as their savior. It is also the acceptance of our group responsibility to support one another in Christian living. Theologically, in being baptized, we die to sin, and are raised to new life in Christ. So the water that we use represents simultaneously being washed clean from sin, and being drowned. Again, we die to sin, and we are raised, washed, to new life in Christ that is lived in community. So we baptize in community. Baptizing infants came about, in part, because we believe that baptism is about God's work in us, and not about anything that we've done to "deserve" God's acceptance. Baptism of infants is the ultimate expression of God's grace, in welcoming people into the Church that not only have done nothing to earn God's love, but that don't even understand what is happening. In infant baptism we make this grace available to them, and then we promise to help them grow in faith and understanding. This way, ideally, there is never a time when they are not a part of the church. Children grow up in the Church receiving the Eucharist at the altar rail, from the time they can reach their little hands out to it. So in a few minutes we are going to make Mikey and Charlie into little saints.

Which brings me to something that is on my mind, which is closing the gap between religion and life. “Closing the gap between religion and life” was the theme of this year’s annual convention of the Diocese of Virginia, which finished yesterday. For three days, Bishop Stevenson and the diocesan staff led more than 500 of us in thinking about how to translate what we say we believe, and what we do in worship, into action in daily life. For instance, how does what we’re doing here today—an important religious ritual, the sacrament of baptism—translate into daily life? What effect does doing this have on us, as individuals, and as a community?

One thing that it does is it inspires and uplifts us as a community. Today we are continuing the communion of saints, adding little ones to carry on the tradition. And as we promise to support these little boys in their formation as Christians, we remind ourselves of our own baptisms. We say the words of the baptismal covenant together, renewing those promises together: to continue in the apostles’ teachings; to seek and serve Christ in all persons; to love our neighbors as ourselves; to strive for justice and peace; to respect the dignity of every human being.

We renew these promises together, for ourselves, for one another, for these little boys, and for the benefit of everyone we come into contact with every day. And we say we will do it with God’s help. Because we can’t do any of this without God’s help. If we can live the promises that we make in our baptismal covenant, if we can walk the talk, we will be “closing the gap between religion and life.”

I invite you to take your bulletin home today and use the baptismal covenant in your prayers and devotions in the week to come. Ask yourself, what does it look like for me to live the baptismal covenant in my daily life? What does it look like for me to close the gap between religion and life?

Amen

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