

All Saints Day: Matthew 5:, Hebrews 11  
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### **A (Un)Common Way of Life**

We Christians are strange creatures. We regularly spend part of our precious weekend gathered together to sing songs that will never be in the Top 40 and to practice odd rituals like splashing water on babies and eating small bits of bread. The weirdest thing we do, though, is probably that we read from a book that's thousands of years old, and, even weirder, we treat it not with antiquarian curiosity but with respect, even reverence, as if it has some authority over us. Nowhere else do you see people doing anything like that. It's strange!

More often than not, the approach people take to old things is to ignore them, or if they pay any attention to them, it is to dismiss them as irrelevant. People in the past were obviously stupid, superstitious, narrow-minded and prejudiced against those not like them. What could enlightened, progressive, morally superior people like ourselves possibly learn from *them*? Haven't we moved on, grown as a society?

And as if our fetish for ancient texts wasn't bad enough, the Church puts its strangeness front and center by celebrating holidays like today, the Feast of All Saints, a day set aside for remembering Christians of the past. Talk about countercultural! It's too much even for some Christians to accept. Which is why many churches don't even acknowledge the day.

And yet we can't get around that fact that to be a Christian is to live with the past, with those who came before us, and to do so with gratitude. On one level, this is plainly sensible. We recognize that we wouldn't be here today, attempting to live lives for God, if it were not for those who came before us, who shared their faith with us, nurtured us in the church, and showed us by their words and actions what it means to be Christian. These "mothers and fathers in the faith" are 'saints' to us, holy ones. They exhibited the peculiarly Christian way of life for us, the sacred pattern of life that Jesus taught his disciples. This way of life is evoked in this morning's Gospel lesson: "blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the pure in heart, the peacemakers." Jesus passed this way of life on to his disciples, who passed it on to others who passed on to others, all the way down to us.

But the saints are important to us not just for what they did in the past, but also for what they do for us today. You see, it is a tenet of the Christian faith that those who die in the Lord, in Christ, live on with Him, in heaven, awaiting his return. And they still have significance for our lives, not as persons to pray to, or as mediators between us and God, as some think, but as models, examples in the faith. We look to them, to this "great cloud of witnesses," as our second lesson calls them, and see how they understood God's word to them and how they sought to live it out. We see how they faced the challenges and struggles of their day with faith and hope, and in their

witness, we find comfort, encouragement, even guidance as we face our own struggles. Sometimes, actually not infrequently, though, their example doesn't comfort us but rather challenges us, showing our faith to be tepid by comparison.

And I'm not just talking here just about the exploits of "hero saints"—those who were martyred like St Lucy and St Agnes because they refused to renounce Christ, or who faced off against hostile unbelievers like St. Patrick did in order to spread the Gospel, or who gave away all their possessions to found a religious order like St. Francis of Assisi or to help the poor like Mother Theresa. The challenge comes not just from "celebrity saints" like these, but from the example of saints closer to us, too, saints like Louise Degrafinried.

Early one Tuesday morning, Louise's husband, Nathan, got up from bed in Mason, Tennessee, to let out the cat. The cat stood at the edge of the porch, his hair bristled up on his arched back, and he hissed. "What you see out there, Cat?" Nathan asked.

A big man stepped from around the corner of the house and pointed a shotgun at Nathan. "Lord, Honey," Louise heard her husband shout. "Open the door; he's got a gun." Before she could open the door, the man with the gun had shoved Nathan inside, pushing him and Louise against the wall.

"Don't make me kill you!" he shouted, thrusting the gun in their faces. The couple knew immediately that the intruder was one of the escaped convicts whom they had heard about on the radio. He was Riley Arzeneaux of Memphis, who, with four other inmates, had escaped from Fort Pillow State Prison the previous Saturday.

Louise, a 73-year-old grandmother, stood her ground. "Young man," she said, "I am a Christian lady. I don't believe in no violence. Put that gun down, and you sit down. I don't allow no violence here." The man relaxed his grip on the shotgun. He looked at her for a moment. Then he laid his gun on the couch. "Lady," he said quietly, "I'm so hungry. I haven't had nothing to eat for three days." "Young man, you just sit down there, and I'll fix you breakfast." "Nathan," she said, "go get this young man some dry socks."

With that, Louise went to work. She fixed him bacon, eggs, toast, milk, and coffee. Then she got out her best cloth napkins and set her kitchen table. "When we sat down," she recalls, "I took that young man by the hand and said, 'Young man, let's give thanks that you came here and that you are safe.' Then we all ate breakfast."

"After breakfast, we sat there," Louise continued, "and I began to pray. I held his hand and kept patting him on the leg. He trembled all over. I said, 'Young man, I love you, and God loves you. God loves us all, every one of us, especially you. Jesus died for you because he loves you so much.'"

“‘You sound just like my grandmother,’ he said, “‘ She’s dead.’” Nathan said that he saw a tear fall down the boy's cheek. “‘About that time, we heard police cars coming down the road. ‘They gonna kill me when they get here,’ he said. “‘No, young man, they aren't going to hurt you. You have done wrong, but God loves you.’ Then Nathan and I took him by the arms, helped him up, and took him out of the kitchen toward the door. ‘Let me do all the talking,’ I told him. The police got out of their cars. They had their guns out. I shouted to them, ‘Y’all put those guns away. This is a Christian home. I don't allow no violence here. Put them away. This young man wants to go back.’” “‘Nathan,’ I said, you bring the young man on out to the car.’ Then they put the handcuffs on him and took him back to the prison.”

That afternoon, two of the other prisoners entered a suburban backyard where a couple were barbecuing. The husband went into his house and came out with a gun. The escapees shot and killed him and took his wife hostage. They released her the next day.

Was Mrs. Degrafinried frightened? “No,” she said. “Nathan said he was scared, but not me. I knew God was with me and had sent that young man to me for a reason. I knew God would lead me in the right direction.”

What this story, as with the examples of the saints in general, does is show how wrong it is to see Christianity as a matter of just “me and Jesus,” as having nothing to do with anyone else, let alone anyone who lived more than a hundred years ago. For a lot of Christians today, it’s almost like they are the first people ever to try to follow Jesus, like no one has ever tried to understand and follow the Bible before, as if nothing of importance, or at least nothing good, happened between Jesus’ day and our own.

But this couldn’t be further from the truth. On the wall outside the door of Winchester Cathedral in England, there is a plaque that reads: “You are entering a conversation that began long before you were born and will continue long after you are dead.” To be a Christian means that we are part of a something larger than ourselves, a mission, a movement, a people, a story that extends into the distant past and that continues to live on, in us, even beyond us.

This is why, when we baptize someone, as we will baptize Tripp in a moment, it is not a matter of “getting the baby done,” nor is it a matter of “claiming one more for Jesus.” Rather, it’s welcoming a new soul into the fellowship, into the story, into the *communion* of Christ and his saints, initiating them into the pattern of life that Jesus taught us and which, we pray, the newly baptized will continue throughout their life and into the life to come. Indeed, the life, the communion we share in the Church is, we believe, not just something that exists among us right now. It’s a relationship, a life, an existence that transcends death.

You may remember the movie, *Places in the Heart*. It came out forty years ago. The movie is about a widow in rural, Depression Era Texas who struggles to make ends meet for her family

after her husband, the sheriff, is killed in the line of duty. Hope comes in the form of a drifter named Moses who offers to plant cotton for the widow. Later the woman also takes in a blind man, Mr. Will, as a boarder.

At the end of the movie, there is a scene that left most moviegoers at the time scratching their heads. The scene takes place at a church service. Attendance is sparse. After reading the Bible, the pastor starts the Lord's Supper, and the bread and wine are passed from pew to pew, as they do in some churches. The widow and Mr. Will are seated together with her children. But when the bread and wine come to Mr. Will, the boarder passes them to the drifter Moses, who minutes before in the movie had been run out of town. Then the widow passes the elements to her husband, who we saw had been killed in the first few minutes of the film. And he passes the bread and wine on to the very young man who killed him, and who had subsequently been lynched. He says "peace of God" to the sheriff as he takes the tray.

The strange scene fades and the movie ends, leaving the audience wondering what in the world that was about. For us Christians, though, it makes perfect sense. You see, there is no place, this side of eternity, we believe, where we are closer to those who've died in Christ than we are at the altar, where we are closest to Him. There at the altar we stand (or kneel) not only next to each other, but alongside all those who stand before Christ's altar in heaven.

What this suggests is that salvation/eternal life/heaven is not something we acquire, as a personal achievement, but rather something we share in with each other, by virtue of our sharing together in Christ. As we take on the pattern of life Jesus taught, a life shaped by giving and forgiving, peace-making and truth-telling, we come to identify with Christ and with others who follow him. Our existence becoming so wrapped up in Him, in his way of life, that when we die, who we are doesn't end, but lives on in Him, in the communion of Christ.

As strange as this might sound, if you are hearing about it for the first time, it is eminently more hopeful than the other ways people try to live forever—creating an artistic masterpiece, making a scientific discovery, having one's name on a building, or being cited in history books. It's not just that these ways take a lot of work, and a lot of luck, but in each of these cases, at the end of the day, you're still dead. As part of the Church, however, "who we are" extends beyond each of us alone to include the whole community of believers, past and present, who live and live on in Christ.

We Christians are indeed strange creatures. Not just the books we read and the songs we sing are different, but the life we share, the pattern of living that Christ gave us, is different, weird. It stands apart from the other ways on offer in the world. And yet for all its strangeness, the way of Christ offers a way we can transcend our limited existence in this life, by immersing us in a community, in a communion, which extends from the past into eternity. And for that, we say, Thanks be to God!