

ALL SAINTS DAY, YEAR A, NOVEMBER 5, 2023

My grandparents immigrated separately to this country from Italy in the 1890's, met here and married near Scranton, Pa in 1899. My grandfather was a coal miner and he and my grandmother lived in Pittston Pa and had eight children, my mom being the youngest. When my mom was three months old her father died and my grandmother became a widow at a young age. Her oldest sons were 13 and 14 so they left school and went to work in the coal mines to support the family. Between what the boys brought home and doing laundry and cooking for others she scrimped and saved enough money to buy what the family always called "the big house". My grandmother also suffered from severe asthma and at one point was so ill the relatives gathered to decide who was taking which child. My grandmother would not tolerate her children being divided up among the relatives and decided then and there she wasn't giving up hope and did everything in her power to get well which she did. During the Great Depression, when her small jobs disappeared, she managed to keep her home and family together by selling the vegetables she grew in her garden. She was a woman who despite all the adversities she encountered persevered because she had hope and great faith.

The stories about my grandmother are part of our family lore. She was also very forward thinking in many ways. My mother moved to NJ in her early 20's, got a job and lived with two of her brothers. When WWII broke out she was working in a war factory where she met my father and eventually they eloped. So my mother wrote home to tell her mother she was bringing someone home for her to meet. Now my mother married a non-Italian and a non Roman Catholic and this was in 1940. My father was not exactly who you wanted to bring home to an immigrant Roman Catholic Italian woman but my grandmother embraced him with her whole heart. She loved him like he was one of her sons. When my oldest sister was born it was my grandmother who strongly suggested to my mom that my sister be baptized in the Episcopal church which was the church my dad attended and was involved in. That is how all of my sisters and I were raised in the Episcopal Church.

I was five when my grandmother, who we called Nonna, died at the age of 87 and so my memories of her are sparse but I vividly remember watching TV with her specifically boxing. She loved boxing and would stand there and throw punches and tell the fighters what they should be doing. But what I most remember about my tiny Italian immigrant grandmother was that she was an inspiration of tolerance, inclusion, love and hope.

Who are the people in your life that have been sources of inspiration? Who has made an impact on your life? Were there teachers who aided your journey through school? Can you think of any friends who have helped you through a difficult time? Who has taught you something worthwhile? Who has made you feel appreciated and special? As you start thinking of them you realize how very ordinary these people were and are. They struggle just like all of us here do and yet truth be known they are all saints. Today as we celebrate All Saints Day we celebrate them as well as each other because we are all saints, all of us.

The saints are not just those whom church officials laboriously examine before granting sainthood because that means absolutely nothing to God. Our lives are what

are important to God. The true meaning of the word saint comes from a Greek word meaning “holy ones” which stems from a Hebrew one meaning “set apart” for the Lord’s use. We’re all holy ones; we’ve all been set apart by God. And what makes us holy is one thing – love. The love that God has instilled in us at birth. Love is the primary test of what scripture defines as “being holy” – that is living in right relationship with God, ourselves, and others. If you want to be holy then you not only have to love God and yourself, you have to love others. It is about making sure everyone sees and experiences the love of God through you. And if we welcome God’s love into our lives we will be transformed. That’s how we are made saints.

Now the most saintly people I know are like my grandmother who keep hope alive, and choose to love and be compassionate and tolerant. Awareness of these ordinary saints hopefully awakens within us the urge to live like someone who has heard the call to absolute love, tolerance and compassion. Mother Theresa was once asked how it felt to be called "a living saint." She replied, "Possibly, people see Jesus in me. But we can see Jesus in each other. Holiness is meant for all people." That means each one of us.

This is one of the reasons why the Beatitudes are read on All Saints Day. I believe the common mistake we make when reading the Beatitudes is to see them as a kind of moral check list. Rather than merely urging a distinct ethic, Jesus is inviting us to imagine what it’s like to live here and now in the kingdom of God. He draws a sharp contrast between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world and challenges our often unconscious allegiance to the latter. He is challenging who we imagine is being blessed in the first place. Who is worthy of God’s attention. Who deserves our attention, respect, and honor. And by doing that, he’s also challenging our very understanding of blessedness and, by extension, our culture’s view of, well, pretty much everything. Power. Success. The good life.. What is noble and admirable. What is worth striving for and sacrificing for. You name it. Jesus invites us to call into question our very worldly view of all the categories with which we structure our life around, or navigate our decisions, and judge those around us. Jesus invites us to be transformed by the spirit.

That’s why Jesus tells us that we are not only given the peace of God, but we are also called to be peacemakers in our homes, our parishes, our offices, our nations, our world. Not only are we given the mercy of God, but we are also called to show mercy to those who need it the most, the sick, the lonely, the hungry, the homeless, the mentally ill, children and spouses, old people who are forgotten and all who suffer in any way. It is through us that God’s work of peace, love, compassion, tolerance and mercy is done.

It is hard work but we need to always ask ourselves am I moving into who God has called me to be for my own sake as well as for the sake of the world. An astute person put it into perspective by saying, “Before you speak to me about your religion, first show it to me in how you treat other people; Before you tell me how much you love your God, show me how much you love all God’s children; Before you preach to me of your passion for your faith, teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors. In the end, I’m not as interested in what you have to tell or sell as in how you choose to live and give.”

That pretty much sums up the Beatitudes and All Saints Day. The history of the Christian faith is a history of people who love mercy, justice and peace so much they have been willing to die for those things. It has been the history of people who have

given shelter to the poor, worked to free slaves, treated women as equal to men – in short, people who have believed that God created everyone and everything and are willing to treat all of their sisters and brothers as members of God's beloved family. People who not only believe God is inclusive but do everything in their power to include all of God's children no matter what their race, gender, religion or sexuality is.

We are recipients of a wonderful legacy passed on to us by the saints who went before us – a legacy of faith and generosity, integrity and hope. All Saints Day reminds us of who we are, and who we are part of, and where we are going. It is a day about a community of people, who, for better or worse, set out to follow Christ amid the complexities and complications of life and gives each other support and care. So, now is the time for all of us to step out in faith, hope, love, compassion and tolerance and recreate who we are – one of God's saints. And let the people say. Amen.