

Sermon for the Celebration of All Saints Day by the Rev. Jan O'Neil at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, Creve Coeur, MO on November 1/2, 2014; Revised Common Lectionary: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; I John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12.

Are there any saints in the room? Raise your hand. After all, we are celebrating All Saint's today. All hands up. You are all saints today and always. You are a child of God: that's what it takes to be a saint, a holy one: simply to be loved by God as we hear in I John today. Becoming a saint is out of our hands. It's a gift. No special accomplishments....just being loved.

Now sinners. Are there any sinners present? Anyone here who falls short of being the person God created you to be? Raise your hands again. In other words: are there any human beings here? Falling short is just part of the human condition. The amazing thing is that God loves us so completely, warts and all, and then God loves us into wholeness. No place in our scriptures does the word saint imply outstanding behavior or accomplishment. The Church, years later after Jesus, started bestowing this title to specific saints, like St. Timothy, and demanded that saints be... saintly. But those "big" saints have their own special day. Today, All Saint's Day celebrates all children of God. and our connection forever to each other—in the communion of saints—"to those we love and those we hurt,"* to our living families, to those who have died before us and even in hope for those yet to come into this world. So just imagine what this vast web means for us and all of the connections we have. Revelation tells us that John looked out and "there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." In the end, God is inclusive and global.

Let me share my October experience of this web of connection with the multiple generations in my family that reach around the globe. Some of you know that my younger daughter Karyn and I have just returned from a trip of a lifetime to inland China. The focus of our journey was to reconnect with the hospital that my grandfather Dr. Watson founded in China 98 years ago. In 1909 my grandpa and grandma, newly weds, took a boat from San Francisco and settled in as missionaries—hospital builders, school founders, bubonic plague fighters--sponsored by the United Church of Christ and Carleton College.. They lived in what is now Fenyang China for 25 years and raised five children there, until they were forced to return to the US in 1934 when there was too much unrest and danger from political factions coupled with financial difficulties. My dad and his four siblings grew up in China and he returned to the US to attend college. My grandparents' forced return was a great loss for them. In a sense they felt failure to continue their calling; a dream deferred.

Yet, I hope you can begin to imagine what a moving trip this was for me to go with my daughter, connecting four generations, to see my Dad's birthplace and to honor my grandpa's medical ministry with people he cherished. We were welcomed with overflowing hospitality and were able to be awed by the transformation of a mission into a large, modern hospital that is fully functioning; to see the house where my dad grew up and the nursing school that once had 20 graduates and now has 10,000 students; **and**, a recently dedicated bronze statue of my grandpa. I was able to throw my arms around this metallic replica of man whom I knew in flesh, as one who held me on his lap, who taught me how to use chopsticks, and when I took off for college encouraged me to venture far and wide and make a difference in this world. In other words my "papa," a saint with a small "s" in the context of being a child of God, seemed now revered as a Saint with a capital "S" in China, credited with introducing modern medicine. In that moment I loved holding on to his bronze leg—that statue that represented the current harvest from the seeds he had planted a century ago. I began to absorb how he had inspired the Chinese people to carry on. His dream to have Chinese doctors and nurses continue his ministry was realized before our eyes. Coincidentally he taught the Beatitudes that are today's Gospel to his staff and he understood that these blessings are not a prescription for earning blessing. Jesus does not ask us to be poor in spirit, or to mourn, or be humble and meek in order to receive blessings. No, Jesus just throws blessings around freely to those least likely to feel blessed. Jesus was blessing those hurting, those on the margins without resources, and my grandpa was his disciple. He treated those with bubonic plague—the Ebola of his day--and those without means for medical care. He risked his own health to do so. He saw the face of Christ in each person. In China he seemed larger than life.

Sometimes part of me longed for the grandpa I knew, the one who held me up to the world in hope at my Baptism, the one who held me on his lap and told me stories, and when he laughed his belly jiggled, just like most retired papas, and he had time to love me, to gaze at me, say to me, "with you I am well pleased." The truth be known, I felt that part of my Grandpa was missing in the perfect bronze statue. It hid his heart of flesh, his humanity, for he, like all of us fell short, like all of us saints. He did wonderful things in China, but he was wed to his work and I knew first hand from my dad that often his five kids felt there was not enough time and energy for them. Grandpa also felt loss and despair; he returned to the US discouraged and was never allowed back into China. I knew this human saint.

Last month in China I could see clearly this man become hero: the man that inspired others to keep on healing, keep on fighting disease in his absence. The seeds he planted 98 years ago now had come to fruition...with a web of generations carrying on the work with the grace of God. Like the parable of

the mustard seed, Grandpa planted seeds that turned into something large and grand and we were seeing it in vivid color. The power of God's love transformed his simple beginning through working with the Chinese people into a thriving medical center today. In the bronze I grasped my Grandpa's dream that has been carried out with God's help, and by the generations that followed him. Karyn and I could witness **for** him. Through us he could see the statue as, "we, we, we;" never "I, I, I,"but community. We are part of the fabric of each other which never ends. We were part of the human fabric woven together forever. Because God weaves us together, it's not about big saints—but God's communion of saints. It takes a people; it takes generations.

We at St. Timothy's are also knit together as a community. Today we join with each other to renew our baptismal vows, to be disciples, to see the face of Christ in each person we meet and in each other. We are all bound together by God—saints one and all. We give special thanks today for our loved ones who have gone before us. We read them by name and etch them on our hearts. We remember.

We in this room are woven together. No one can take that away from us: we are part of each other. I carry you in me. We have loved and nurtured each other. We have laughed and cried together. In the process God knows us intimately and lovingly. This is God's work. Seeds were planted for us here. We continue to sow in gratitude. It is that love, these connections that find me forever grateful for God's gifts to us that are amazing, generous.

Imagine what God can do at St. Tim's with seeds that were planted before us and with those we continue to sow today in gratitude. You and I will not be here in 98 years to witness and see God's work through community at St. Tim's, but we can plant the seeds, we can offer up our hope as we lift up our children in baptism and join with the communion of saints. It is in community that God's love carries us on and we are left only to respond with generosity. As we repeat our baptismal vows let us hear God who says to Jesus and to each of us: "You are my beloved and with you I am well pleased!" Alleluia. Amen.

*BCP, p. 862: Catechism