

Sermon at St. Andrew's Church
November 6, 2020 – All Saint's Sunday – by the Rev. Connie Jones

Phone call from my daughter Cary a few months ago,
 back when the Confederate statues were coming down.
 “Hey, Mom. How many of our 18th- century ancestors owned slaves?”
 Cary’s got the genealogy bug (like my father).
 She and her daughter bear one ancestor’s name as a middle name.
 (OK, so the college that skunked ODU in football yesterday does too.)
 “?How many owned slaves?” I repeated the question. “Probably all of them.”

We talked about why those statues had been put up –
 to remember and instruct, I suppose. Also to intimidate.
 We agreed it was a risky business
 to make bronze effigies on horses of real, fallible people, from fallible times,
 or name buildings and institutions after them.

“Creating heroes for kids to look up to is dicey right out of the gate,” I said.
 “It’s an invitation to do research on their failures and sins.”
 “Yeah,” she said. “And they’ll grow up to be cynics who don’t trust their teachers –
 and won’t know what’s true or good when it stares them in the face.”

I said, “Well, we could play it safe.
 We could name schools after fruits and vegetables instead.”

The early Christian church remembered Jesus as Lord,
 remembered his mother Mary and his disciples and called them saints –
 gave them a commemoration day on the calendar.
 But by the third century, so many Christians had been martyred for their faith
 that the days in the year ran out, so a communal All Saints’ day was invented.
 Later, the Roman church developed guidelines for “canonizing” new saints.
 It still requires investigation and documentation of an official miracle.

But remembering those bronze horsemen with swords,
 I’m glad no one’s nominated *me*, because the picking-over of my life
 would reveal the unsaintly things I’ve said and done.
 Think of Mother Theresa, whose journal disappointed so many believers
 because she had long bouts of depression, and the sense that God was absent.
 Can she *really* be a saint, people asked?

But here's a suggestion for celebrating the lives of saints,
 while still telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth.
 A way to proclaim, as well, that saints are still among us.
 The notion comes from an odd feature of the Christian calendar.
 A sort of happy commemoration collision.

You see, the church instituted a “day-after” feast day:
 All Saints’ on November 1 would be followed by *All Souls* on November 2,
 to remember the loved ones in our lives who have died,
 who have somehow manifested God’s love to us.
 It’s also known as “the day of the dead,” and some Christian cultures
 commemorate it with elaborate celebrations and rituals.
 There’s even a recent movie that features it.

I think about this mash-up of official saints and unofficial ones,
 living ones and saints long gone –
 as I get to sit sometimes facing this beautiful stained-glass image of St. Andrew,
 where at the right time of the day,
 the light of Christ somehow blazes from sun to St. Andrew to me.
 We know so little about Andrew, his virtues and vices,
 but he played his part in God’s ongoing story,
 and now he looks like he’s passing Christ’s light right on to us.

Lately I’ve been hearing stories on the radio in a series called “My Unsung Hero.”
 You can find them online. Here’s a good one.
 Justin Horner’s pickup blew a tire on a freeway in Oregon.
 He had a spare but no jack, so he held up a handmade sign that said NEED HELP.
 A couple hours later he was ready to start hitch-hiking.
 But a beat-up van stopped and a man and his wife – fruit-pickers, he figured –
 got out with their little girl, who spoke a little English.
 The man produced a jack, which hoisted up the tire,
 but when Jason yanked on the first lug-net, the man’s flimsy wrench broke.
 The woman jumped in the car, headed out, and was soon back with a brand new wrench.
 The men changed the tire, and Justin was lavish with his thank-yous.
 He offered the family what he had – a \$20 bill.
 They refused. He insisted, and put the bill in their tool kit.
 As he turned back to his truck, the little girl asked if he was hungry. He was.
 She brought him a tamale from their cooler and then hopped in the van.
 As both cars waited to re-enter traffic,
 he unwrapped the tamale, only to see his \$20 bill nestled inside.

Racing to the van, knocking on the driver's window,
 he tried to hand the twenty back to the man.
 But shaking his head "no," the man said to him in English, "*Today you. Tomorrow me*"
 The little girl waved goodbye as off they went.
 As Justin says at the end of his tale, "What happened was just *big*."
 I'd say, it's just "holy."

Saints may drive beat-up vans, and we'll never know their names.
 Saints may be family members or people we see every day.
 But when the light of love shines through them, and we see it,
 we'll have seen God's own love in person.

In a few minutes as I say the prayer of consecration at the altar,
 there's a place to name saints among the heavenly host.
 I will name Andrew,
 and then read the list of those who've died from this parish in the last year.
 I'll pause. Then *you* are invited to say, right out loud,
 the name of someone who's been a saint to you.
 Yes, speak up – all at the same time – until we're done.
 Maybe later you'll tell someone the story of your saint –
 how they got things wrong sometimes,
 But how God's own light somehow passed through them to you.
 And remember, as you go out into your daily life,
 to watch for those unsung heroes.
 One might be sitting in a pew with you!

But most of all, remember that you too are called *to be* a saint.
 Not because you can manage being perfect.
 Not because you want to be congratulated.
 But for the sheer joy and blessedness
 of letting the Light flow through you to somebody else,
 a sparkle in this often dreary world.

You've probably heard the verse from the Leonard Cohen song,
 quoted often because it's so true.
 "Ring out the bells that still can ring/ forget your perfect offering.
 There's a crack in everything:/ it's how the light gets in."

Or.....as Jesus might say to us, "me yesterday. You today and tomorrow."