

07 November 2021: All Saints Sunday

In my mid-teens my family moved to another house. As happens when moving, there were some things rediscovered. One such find were some old photograph albums from my mother's family. We knew these were old photos because they were tintypes. Tintype photographs were popular in the 19th and early 20th Century. A tintype is a photograph printed on a piece of light metal (not actual tin). They were easy and quick to make, durable and rendered excellent likenesses.

I remember looking at the photos, seeing the old-fashioned clothes, hairstyles, and the strange faces staring back. There were no dates or locations, not even names with the photos. My mother would speculate on the silent, other-time people: "That might be my mother's grandmother, but I am not sure." I would look at the images of my forebears and think—they are part of me, part of my identity and I know nothing about them.

This is All Saints Sunday. I wonder how relevant the saints are. There are churches that enshrine saints in stained-glass windows, on icons, with statues. There are liturgical calendars, as in the Episcopal Church, with many saints' days observed. Yet, for most people are the saints as relevant as strangers' photographs?

It is not that the saints are unknowable. There are hundreds of books about the saints, some provide information on a saint for every day of the year. Do an internet search for saints and you will get thousands of hits. "Googling" Episcopal saints will likewise provide many web sites. There are internet sites that provide the liturgies for daily Morning and Evening Prayer with the readings and a saints' biography all provided with a few key strokes. I do not think it is lack of access that is the difficulty.

Why are the saints important? The saints are examples, that authentic Christian faith lived daily in the hurly-burly of life is possible. Few of the saints had placid lives; most were troublemakers or trouble found them because they were followers of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the saints unsettle us; they remind us that being a Jesus follower will likely make *us* troublemakers or get *us* into conflict with a society increasingly dismissive of and hostile to Christianity.

Secondly, the saints remind us that while the details of Christian living vary from era to era and place to place, Christians have lived authentically in every conceivable social context. As Americans we have different concerns and distinctive ways of living our faith, especially concerning secondary matters, than people who lived a thousand years ago, or someone today living in Africa or Asia. However, on what is most important, there is an amazing unanimity: Authentic faith means believing in Christ, witnessing for Christ, serving others in Christ's Name regardless of context and consequence.

A third reason to learn about the saints is that they provide an unmistakable testimony that we are never alone. No matter what our life's challenges, no matter our spiritual struggles, there are others who have been tested and tried, too; and with God's help have persevered. The saints have struggled, striven, and even failed; and yet, Jesus never gave up on them. Some have had tragic moral lapses, shockingly mistaken views, seemingly lived pointless lives, or appear to be dismal failures. Jesus never gave up on them and somehow transformed their lapses, mistakes, and failures into glory and triumph. Sometimes a saint's life is more like a seed planted, only sprouting, growing, blossoming, and producing fruit in other generations. Those whom the world judges as human disasters and failures are undoubtedly the most important saints: they remind us, faithfulness to Jesus in our lives just as they are, not results from a human perspective, is what makes saints.

Today I urge you to get acquainted, or re-acquainted, or better acquainted with the saints. You may find yourself more intrigued and helped than you imagine. You may find yourself with a large handful of favorite saints, whose lives are seeds for your growth. I certainly have my favorite saints: Sts. Benedict and Bernard; St. Augustine; Julian of Norwich, George Herbert and Nicholas Ferrar; William Wilberforce; Hilda of Whitby, Anskar of Sweden; and Mary, the Mother of Our Lord.

For all the holy saints of every age who are truly the building blocks of the great spiritual edifice of the Church, Jesus Christ himself the chief cornerstone: thanks be to God.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.