

Mark Twain once said about a man he knew  
that he was a saint. . .in the worst sense of that word.

With that in mind, there are four quick things to note about saints--  
about saints in the best sense of the word.

#1: We are all saints because saints are simply ordinary people  
transformed by the death and resurrection of Christ  
Being a saint is not something we do on our own or make of ourselves  
but is something that happens to us

Lazarus couldn't raise himself from the dead  
but needed the power of God, working through Jesus, to live again  
Pretty much the same thing happens to us, in us and among us,  
when God gets to work on us

#2: Just because we are saints who have been given a new life by Christ,  
doesn't mean everything is gonna be good/easy for us from now on.  
And to look more closely at what that might mean,  
we could use a little background.

I think it was the late Rev. Dr. Donald Grayston  
a good man, a good priest and a good friend  
who died a few years ago just before All Saints.,

In a conversation we had earlier about what defines a saint,  
he told me that there are two characteristics of saints  
A. No one believes it all  
B. No one believes it all the time

In other words, to say that no one believes it all is prompted by  
the recognition and admission that each of us is gifted  
with only a partial understanding of the mystery of God with us  
and the mystery of God within us.

And so we all need each other--need each other--  
to help each of us and all of us to see the larger picture. . .

to learn other different or imaginative methods of looking and seeing  
other creative ways of trying to grasp just a bit more of the mystery  
of our relationship with God. . .and God's relationship with us  
and God's relationship with and to everything else around us.

Similarly, just as no one believes it all, so no one believes it all the time.

And, to me, what that means is that journey of faith  
is never smooth or uninterrupted or without twists and turns,  
but that this journey fluctuates between faith/unfaith,  
believing and doubting, accepting and questioning.

And so doubts, questions, struggles, objections, even outright disbelief  
are all are normal. . .to be expected. . .because we are human beings  
who are not programmed to have all the "right" answers,  
but who are free--free to think, to explore, to wonder. . .  
and free to ask--to ask "how" and "why", and,  
and in good Lutheran fashion, to ask "What does this mean?"  
"What is God up to in all of this?"

In today's reading, Mary--and, yes, the same "Mary"  
who got her sister Martha's goat because she, Mary,  
didn't help prepare dinner for Jesus and the disciples  
but just sat at Jesus' feet and listened;  
and, yes, that Mary whom Jesus held up as an example  
of someone who had chosen "the better way"—  
it is that Mary who says to her Master, Teacher and Friend:  
"Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died."

Evidently, she, and her sister, were disappointed in and distressed at  
Jesus' seeming indifference to their need and their stresses  
because he didn't come right away to heal Lazarus  
when he got the news that Lazarus was very, very ill

In the same way, on the cross, Jesus cried out:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why have you left me in the lurch. . .left me holding the bag?"  
The very human Jesus is heartsick, frightened and wondering  
where and why his Abba, his daddy, was absent. . .  
why his God and Father had turned his back on his beloved son

And we have all had similar feelings and similar questions. .  
and at such times, we need others in the "communion of saints"  
to believe for us. . .to hold us together. . .to hold us up.

Ann Strand, my former and late co-pastor, so aptly put it this way:

Sometimes we confess the words of the Creed  
because we believe them. . .and other times we confess  
those same words in order to believe them.

And at those times, it is the faith of the community--the "collective" faith--  
that helps sustain us through our times of difficulty or discouragement,  
those midnights of deep doubt in the midst of deep darkness.

And that's why we call this festival the feast of ALL saints--  
past, present and future saints--who support us, stand with us,  
believe for us and carry us on their shoulders. . .because together,  
we are more than the sum total of all the individuals.  
Together we are a communion of saints. . .of ALL saints.

And that brings us to the #3 thing to know about saints. . .  
which is, that it is right and proper for us  
to celebrate special occasions like this one  
where we give thanks to God for the lives of those saints  
in our lives and in our world who bear witness  
to the presence and power of grace in our lives and in our world

And we do so, not so much to honour the people themselves,  
but to praise and thank God for the gifts of such people--  
ordinary people with ordinary strengths and failings--  
people who may not so much distinguished  
by their outward goodness as by the love of God  
which shines through them--and shines brighter than anything else about them.

As the little girl said after looking at the people  
pictured in the church's stained-glass windows:  
"Saints are people the light shines through."

For example, take Saint Maximilian, the first, and first-century,  
Christian conscientious objector, drafted by Roman army  
but who refused to serve because, as he said,  
his loyalty was to God, not to Rome

Shamed and saddened, his father, a highly decorated veteran soldier,  
knew that such a refusal would mean his son's death.  
At his beheading, Maximilian noticed the shabby clothing  
of his executioner and, calling to his father in the crowd,  
asked that his own new clothes would be taken off him  
after his death and given to the executioner.

And there was St James, brother of St. John, who, on his way to death,  
was so obviously full of grace and faith, hope and love  
that the guard assigned to accompany him fell on his knees before him  
and confessed faith in his prisoner's God.  
Raising him up by the hand, James kissed him on the cheek,  
and said "Peace be with you." And then both men were executed together.  
But their last exchange lives on in the sharing of the peace  
we observe to this very day:  
"The peace of the Lord be with you. . ."

And how about Felicitas, a Roman woman of high birth and great wealth  
who, in 100 of the Common Era, because of her faith in Christ  
was forced to watch all seven of her sons executed. . .  
and was then beheaded with the same sword used on her sons.

And saints are not only from the First Century either.

In George Bernard Shaw's play, *Saint Joan*, about Joan of Arc,  
a young woman who believed she heard the voice of God  
calling her to defend France. . .and was eventually put to death  
for her faith and her actions—

in the play, Joan is trying desperately to get Charles,  
the spineless, weakling of a prince, to show some initiative,  
some drive, some hustle of his own—and in her exasperation,  
she shouts at him that there is one thing he has never figured out.  
“Charlie,” she says, “You have never learned that we are put on this earth,  
not to do our own business, but to do God's.”

And how about saints from our own time?

Mahatma Gandhi - not a Christian but his powerful witness changed the world

Martin Luther King Jr - martyred--murdered--for his faith/conviction/dreams

Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador--

a priest and Bishop (and now an “official” saint) who was shot dead  
while raising the bread in the midst of the Eucharistic Prayer--  
martyred because of his decision to stand with the poor  
against the oppressive, corrupt, and murdering government.

Nelson Mandela who refused to become embittered

by his 25 years of imprisonment and, instead,  
ended up becoming the leader of South Africa  
and one of the most revered and honoured people in the world.

Such people. . .such saints. . .are proof of what James Burke wrote on the last page  
of his book *Swan Peak* where his reluctant hero, Dave Robicheaux,  
reflects on who really makes a difference in this world.

Burke writes ". . .*the real gladiators of the world are so humble in their origins and so unremarkable in their appearance that when we stand next to them in a grocery store lineup, we never guess how brightly their souls can burn in the dark.*"

In the same way, while our flaws and failings and weaknesses  
often get in the way of others seeing us as saints,  
eventually, those very frailties which make us what we are as humans—  
the very qualities which are the glass from which we are fashioned--  
eventually it is our brokenness, our weaknesses and our failings  
which become the means and the seams  
by which the light of Christ shines through us--  
and we discover that we are far more lovely than we ever imagined.

And that brings us to the fourth and last ingredient of sainthood--  
and it is found in the little phrase at the very end of today's Gospel:  
"Unbind him and let him go."

In the story told by John, Lazarus comes out of the tomb,  
hidden and covered by the grave windings--  
those bands of cloth used to bind up and wind around a corpse.  
But at Jesus's command, the windings are removed,  
and as they are unrolled a strip at a time,  
the face of Lazarus is glimpsed a bit at a time. . .  
until he is finally and fully revealed.

In the same way, at his crucifixion, Jesus' glory is "hidden" by the cross. . .  
and yet, glimpses or hints of that divine nature are given to those who have eyes to see. . .  
even though it is only at his resurrection from the dead  
that he is ultimately revealed as the One in whom God's fullness dwells--  
as the One who is "God from God and Light from Light".

Likewise, the common elements of bread and wine at the meal we share  
"hide" or "disguise" or "cloak" the presence and power of the Saviour--  
but those who look with the eyes and the hearts of faith  
see these humble gifts for what they are:  
The bearers or carriers or vehicles of Christ's light and life.

In that meal. . .and in our presence at this table this morning. . .  
or whenever and wherever we feast on these gifts of the earth. . .  
Christ is "unbound" and we are "enlightened".  
That is, his life and light come to us, are given to us,  
are tasted by us and shine in us and shine through us. . .  
through us who are saints. . .through us who are one with "all the saints"  
because all of them are bound to us, and we are bound to all of them  
and all of us together are bound to Christ.

That's why this is called the Feast of All Saints,  
a Feast for all Saints, and a Feast with All Saints. Amen. SDG