

All Saints/All Faithful Departed
Isaiah 25:6-9; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Psalm 130 or 116:10-17; John 5:24-27
(Readings for All Faithful Departed – November 2)
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

All Faithful Departed...and Everyone Else

Today we remember all the Saints *and* All the Faithful Departed—All Souls—all those whom we love but see no longer. Yesterday the Church officially celebrated All Saints—all those designated as saints by the Church as well as others lesser known. The New Testament uses the word “saints” to describe the entire membership of the community of faith. However, from early on, the word “saint” came to be applied to individuals of heroic sanctity – especially the early martyrs – whose witness and deeds were recalled with gratitude by later generations. Beginning in the tenth century, it became customary to set aside another day, as an extension of All Saints, on which the Church remembered the vast body of the faithful, unknown by the wider church. And so All Souls became a day for particular remembrance of family members and friends. For some time now, the Episcopal Church has called this day the Commemoration of All Faithful Departed.

But as Sam Portaro points out, there lies a contradiction with the way this day is observed.¹ For when we prayed the Collect for All *Faithful* Departed—the feast we once called All Souls—we prayed to a God who is “the Maker and redeemer of all *believers*.” But by praying that, we fall short of God’s all-embracing love—what happened to everyone else, the non-believers, some of whom many of us have known and loved? I prefer the old name for this Observance—All Souls. Why should we pray only for the *faithful* departed, everyone else be damned? This collect then asks God to “grant to the *faithful* departed the unsearchable benefits of the passion” of Jesus. Grant only to the *faithful* departed? What’s happened to our confident faith that at least one of the “unsearchable benefits of the passion” is that the passion of Jesus is “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” as the First Letter of John puts it (I John 2:2)? Our first reading from the prophet Isaiah confidently proclaims that *everyone* is born of God and *everyone* is gathered up in God at death. The consistent message from our Scripture is that everything and everyone belongs to God always. And while our gospel reading speaks of some coming under judgment, we also know that the One who judges us most finally is the same One who loves us most fully. And so may our prayers this day be for all souls—for all belong to God—always.

The wisdom of many religious traditions, including our own, speaks of our lives as lived for the purpose of preparing us for our death. The loss of my father at an early age (through divorce)—never seeing him again after the age of eight—became for me an early dress rehearsal for facing other losses, small and great (in my personal and parish life), which in turn, provided rehearsals as it were, preparing me for facing my own death. Yet at this point in my life, I can say with all the ambivalence of Woody Allen that I’m not afraid to die; I just don’t want to be there when it happens! Certainly such an appreciation—albeit, an ambivalent one—of others’ and eventually our own mortality, has us live our lives more intentionally and less obliviously. And at the same time—and this is part of the

almost necessary ambivalence—as the writer Albert Camus portrays in his work, The Myth of Sisyphus, we should reject death and its absurd imminence to the degree that we live life to the fullest until the day we die.ⁱⁱ

The greatest tragedy is not death itself, but what dies in us while we are still alive. Life, in fact, is not so much a dress rehearsal for the future, as much as it is simply being and acting in, and reflecting on, the actual play itself, in the present moment, which, of course, is the only moment we are truly alive. Chinese dissident artist, Ai Weiwei, adds: “I think right now is the moment... We don’t know what is it the moment of... But really, we see the sunshine coming in... Our whole condition [may be] very sad, but we still feel warmth, and the life in our bodies can still tell us that there is excitement in there, even though death is waiting. [So] we had better not [just try to] enjoy the moment, but *create* the moment.”ⁱⁱⁱ And we are by no means alone in all this in this moment, and that is what this day reminds us of. For what we call “all the company of heaven” or “the cloud of witnesses” are all the faithful *and* not so faithful departed who *live in us*. We are often made to believe that everything that we think say or do has to be our personal accomplishment. But as people who belong to a larger family of the living and the dead, we know in our hearts that anything of spiritual or lasting value is not just the result of our individual accomplishment, but the fruit of a life shared with others. We stand alongside, and on the shoulders of many others, living and departed.^{iv}

Calling on the “cloud of witnesses,” connecting with “all the company of heaven,”—all the faithful and not-so-faithful departed—means being connected with all those who are still with us, *and* all those whom we have ever loved and lost and see no longer—and even those we never knew well or never even heard of, but upon whose shoulders we somehow stand. This connection is real and powerful. This awareness of being part of “all the company of heaven” “makes our hearts as wide as the world” in the words of Henri Nouwen.^v For the love with which we love is not just our own individual capacity to love; it is also the love of Jesus and all the departed living in us. When the Spirit of Jesus lives in our hearts, all who have lived their lives in that Spirit live there, too—even the less- or non-believing departed. Our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, our teachers and their teachers, our spiritual guides and their spiritual guides, even our less than positive role models. They are all part of our hearts, part of who we are. They inspire us, guide us, encourage us, warn us, and give us hope; and we can call on this eternal *cheering section* urging us onward. So then, our Commemoration of All Souls is not just a mere remembrance of those who have gone before us. Rather, it is a celebration of this living community visible amongst us, and a large though less visible community in our hearts—altogether a very real presence.

So, whatever other reasons we have for coming here today, if we have come also to give each other our love and to give God our love, then together with the Angels and Archangels, with Jesus and his disciples and all the saints—and with all those whom we love but see no longer, and all those still present in our lives (including this gathered community)—we are “all the company of heaven.”

ⁱ Sam Portaro, Brightest and Best (Boston; Cowley Publications, 1998), pp. 197-198. See also Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006 (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2006), p. 438

ⁱⁱ See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991 edition).

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Ai Weiwei, *Weiwei-isms* (Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 83.

^{iv} For those who question the fact that we stand on many other's shoulders, as it were, listen to David Brooks' take on this in a piece he wrote called "The Credit Illusion" (in *The New York Times*, August 2, 2012):

"Over the past few years, I've built a successful business. I've worked hard, and I'm proud of what I've done. But now President Obama tells me that social and political forces helped build that. Mitt Romney went to Israel and said cultural forces explain the differences in the wealth of nations. I'm confused. How much of my success is me, and how much of my success comes from forces outside of me?"
- Confused in Columbus.

Dear Confused,

This is an excellent question. It has no definitive answer. There were many different chefs of the stew that is you: parents, friends, teachers, ancestors, mentors and, of course, Oprah Winfrey. It's very hard to know how much of your success is owed to those people and how much is owed to yourself. As a wise man once said, what God hath woven together, even multiple regression analysis cannot tear asunder.

Nonetheless, this question does have a practical and a moral answer. It is this: You should regard yourself as the sole author of all your future achievements and as the grateful beneficiary of all your past successes.

As you go through life, you should pass through different phases in thinking about how much credit you deserve. You should start your life with the illusion that you are completely in control of what you do. You should finish life with the recognition that, all in all, you got better than you deserved.

In your 20s, for example, you should regard yourself as an Ayn Randian Superman who is the architect of the wonder that is you. This is the last time in your life that you will find yourself truly fascinating, so you might as well take advantage of it. You should imagine that you have the power to totally transform yourself, to go from the pathetic characters on "Girls" to the awesome and confident persona of someone like Jay-Z.

This sense of possibility will unleash feverish energies that will propel you forward. You'll be one of those people who joined every club in high school, started a side business while in college and spent the years after graduation bravely doing entrepreneurial social work across the developing world.

This may not make you sympathetic when it comes to other people's failures (as everybody's Twitter feed can attest), but it will give you liftoff velocity in the race of life.

In your 30s and 40s, you will begin to think like a political scientist. You'll have a lower estimation of your own power and a greater estimation of the power of the institutions you happen to be in.

You'll still have faith in your own skills, but it will be more the skills of navigation, not creation. You'll adapt to the rules and peculiarities of your environment. You'll keep up with what the essayist Joseph Epstein calls "the current snobberies." You'll understand that the crucial question isn't what you want, but what the market wants. For a brief period, you won't mind breakfast meetings.

Then in your 50s and 60s, you will become a sociologist, understanding that relationships are more powerful than individuals. The higher up a person gets, the more time that person devotes to scheduling and personnel. As a manager, you will find yourself in the coaching phase of life,

enjoying the dreams of your underlings. Ambition, like promiscuity, is most pleasant when experienced vicariously.

You'll find yourself thinking back to your own mentors, newly aware of how much they shaped your path. Even though the emotions of middle-aged people are kind of ridiculous, you'll get sentimental about the relationships you benefited from and the ones you are building. Steve Jobs said his greatest accomplishment was building a company, not a product.

Then in your 70s and 80s, you'll be like an ancient historian. Your mind will bob over the decades and then back over the centuries, and you'll realize how deeply you were formed by the ancient traditions of your people — being Mormon or Jewish or black or Hispanic. You'll appreciate how much power the dead have over the living, since this will one day be your only power. You'll be struck by the astonishing importance of luck — the fact that you took this bus and not another, met this person and not another.

In short, as maturity develops and the perspectives widen, the smaller the power of the individual appears, and the greater the power of those forces flowing through the individual.

But you, Mr. Confused in Columbus, are right to preserve your pride in your accomplishments. Great companies, charities and nations were built by groups of individuals who each vastly overestimated their own autonomy. As an ambitious executive, it's important that you believe that you will deserve credit for everything you achieve. As a human being, it's important for you to know that's nonsense."

^v Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. Nov. 13-14