

In That Number
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All Saints Sunday
November 3, 2024
Community Church of Providence

Psalm 100
Romans 14:7-9

Today, on All Saints Sunday, we have honored and given thanks for those saints who have gone before us. But...that begs the question: in our tradition, “What is a saint?” Or, rather, “who is a saint?”

The word “saint,” as we use it in our tradition means those people – those very “regular” people who have done their best to serve God and others, who have paved our way and given us shoulders to lean on and stand on. Those whose lives have not been lived only for themselves, but have been freely shared.

The last chapter of Romans isn’t something we often read aloud in church because it’s not particularly theological – it is a list of names, some difficult to pronounce of course; but today it is important, because this is one of those places where we find our understanding of saints. Paul writes:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, 2 so that you may welcome her in the Lord, as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, my coworkers in Christ Jesus, 4 who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but also all the churches of the gentiles. 5 Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. 6 Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you. 7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Israelites who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. 8 Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. 9 Greet Urbanus, our coworker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys....

And so on! He keeps going! – the Apostle Paul gets carried away as he begins to think of all of those beloved people who have supported him along the journey.

I feel the same way, and I suspect you do, too. If we started to make a list of all those people who had made a difference in our lives, both living and passed on, we would get carried away like Paul. Let your mind wander a moment to those special people....

The sense of belonging is something we often long for throughout our lives. Our scriptures this morning both affirm our ultimate belonging to God.

The psalm is a reassurance that God created us and claims us; and guides us all of our days, caring for us all the while:

Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

We belong with God.

The other text, found a little earlier in the letter to the church in Rome, talks about two more aspects of belonging to God. The first is the promise that we belong to God *even after death*. Paul writes, “So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” It is a belonging that transcends this life, that continues, no matter what.

The second is about how we live in belonging: we do not live to ourselves alone. This scripture is found in a section about difficult ethical choices – Paul argues that, as we make choices, we shouldn’t think only about our own consciences, since we don’t live in a vacuum, but also about the impact our choices have on others.

I have happy memories of attending a Bon Jovi concert in Tampa about 10 years ago. We had the cheapest tickets – what should have been terrible seats behind the stage – but Bon Jovi wanted to include our section, so kept turning around and singing in our direction, so they ended up being some of the best seats in the house. If memory serves me right, that night he sang one of his well-loved songs, “It’s My Life.”

It’s a great song, but, not surprisingly, Paul encourages us to think a little differently than Bon Jovi! – to think about our lives as not only belonging to ourselves (it’s my life!) but as shared – shared lives – as belonging beyond ourselves. It’s our life.

This can be a challenge in an individualistic culture, but it is also empowering to realize the ripples of influence and interconnection that our lives have. The scripture says, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.”

The songs we sang this morning – and the one we will sing at the close of worship – echo these scriptures and the aspirations of our hearts. They are each statements of commitment to a way of life:

“I’m gonna live so God can use me.”

And, “I will build my life upon Your love.”

And in a moment we will sing, “Lord, I want to be in that number.”

Today, we say, thank you, God, for those saints who lived lives beyond themselves. Thank you for those long lists in our hearts! May we too live lives which are shared.

And, thank you, God, for reminding us that we belong – with you and to you and in you.

Amen.