

“To Be a Saint”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
All Saints Day – November 2, 2014

Ephesians 1: 11-23

Today is a special day in the life of the entire church. It is All Saints Day, a day set aside in the liturgical calendar to remember those Christians who have gone before us. It is no coincidence that it comes at the same time as Halloween. All Saints Day has been celebrated since the 8th-century, and the name Halloween comes from “All Hallows Eve,” or the eve of All Saints.

This day was originally a Roman Catholic holiday in the Christian year, when the church recognized those who had been anointed as saints, praising God for their lives and asking for God’s blessing from the saints. After the Reformation, the church continued to recognize this day, but more with an emphasis to remember those Christians who have died in the past year, giving thanks to God for their lives of service. In a real sense, this is truly an ecumenical day in the life of the larger church, one which shares a common purpose despite our different traditions.

As I shared with the children earlier, All Saints Day is very important to me in my life of faith. I reflect on those who have gone before me, but who in particular have had a deep impact on my faith development. I grew up with a small immediate family, with no brothers or sisters, but I felt a broad connection with extended family on both my mother’s and father’s side. So when members of that larger family die and enter their eternal rest, it has a similar impact for me as it would if it were my own parents or siblings. This past year, I had a great aunt, a great uncle, and an aunt all die within the span of two months. As one generation gradually departs this life, it reminds me of how fortunate I am to have been touched by God’s love through each of them.

I’m sure you can share in those thoughts and feelings as you consider those people in your life who have been “saints” to you: spouses, parents, grandparents, relatives, co-workers, teachers, childhood or adult friends. You know those people who made a huge impact on your life in any number of ways: the loving way they raised you, the caring way they shared in your grief at a death, the selfless way they offered you aid in a time of need, the thoughtful way they passed on words of advice which were especially appropriate.

All Saints Day is more than a day to remember names from the past, or to live in the glory days of times gone by. It is an opportunity to focus on God and how God has been a part of all human history. It is more than a history lesson – it is a lesson of God’s love for the world through God’s Son, Jesus Christ. It is more than fond memories – it is

our chance to return thanks to God for all that God has given, and to actively participate in the claim which God makes on our lives.

Our New Testament reading reflects on how we, and all the saints, have been loved by a generous, hope-filled God. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of the inheritance we have obtained through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is an inheritance of salvation through Christ, “the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory” (1:14). We have been promised this inheritance from the moment we heard the word of truth, and we can rest assured in this promise of God.

And in Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians, we learn of the hope that is a part of that promised inheritance. God’s prayer for us is that we may have wisdom and revelation as we come to know Christ, so that we may know “what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints” (1:18). With all those who have gone before us, we are promised eternal life, sealed by our Lord, Jesus Christ.

To be inheritors of this promise is more than an individual hope. To be inheritors through Jesus Christ means to share in this inheritance with all others who have heard the promise. All the saints before us have received this wonderful gift, and through Jesus Christ, we are joined together by this inheritance as God’s children. We have a common bond with those before us, with those around us, and with those who will come after us: the body of Christ in the world – the church – is how we know of our shared inheritance of God’s promise of hope, and we will all share in those glorious riches in the heavenly kingdom.

On October 6, the oldest saint of John Knox Church departed this world to enter God’s heavenly kingdom. Elleanore Gilliland, otherwise known as Ellie, died six days short of her 103rd birthday. Ellie grew up in Massachusetts the first-half of her life, before moving to Indianapolis and spending the second-half of her life here with her husband. But you could always tell when speaking with her where home was; as Debbie liked to say, whenever she needed her fix of a Boston-accent, she went to talk to Ellie!

Ellie had no living relatives when she died. She and her husband had no children, and any of her extended family had already died. In essence, her community at The Harrison Retirement Home, where she lived for the past eighteen years, her friends, and this church community were her family. We celebrated her life this past Wednesday evening at The Harrison, and I am deeply grateful for Ruth Ann Hogsett, Doris Morin, Georgia Thomas, and so many others who helped to make that time meaningful for all who attended.

As Ellie got older, I know she grew frustrated with her inability to hear or see as well as she wanted. It became harder for her to

participate in conversations over meals, or for her to acknowledge folks in the hallway because of her failing eyesight. One time she said to me, "I don't know what I'm supposed to still be doing here, Frank."

Well, I can share that one of the ways she shared God's inheritance of hope and love was with the youth and children of our congregation. At John Knox, when our middle school youth go through Confirmation Class, that is in preparation for them to become an active member of the church. The students and their adult mentors do many "out-of-class" activities during confirmation. One of those activities is to visit a homebound member of our congregation, someone who is unable to attend worship or other activities but is still very much considered an important member of our community of faith. We call it "visiting a saint of the church."

Over the last several years, numerous young men and women visited Ellie as one of the saints of the church. And she welcomed them with open arms, telling them of her childhood and teenage years, what brought her to Indianapolis, and why the church was important to her. The youth and their adult mentors often brought her cookies that they had baked, and she never turned those gifts away! But more than anything, the youth would come back and share how much they admired her, how amazed they were by her memory and her recollections for how old she was, and how they felt a connection with someone others might otherwise overlook.

That was the light of God shining through Ellie Gilliland, and I can tell you, as both the pastor of these young people, as well as the father of one of them who visited her, she made a lasting impact on their faith.

Let us remember the saints of the past with thanksgiving and respect, for they are the models of faithfulness who provide guidance in our journey today. Let us remember the saints of the present with joy and awareness, for we are among them, and others will judge our lives according to our attentiveness to God's Spirit and calling as the church universal. Let us look ahead to the saints of tomorrow with expectant hope, for they are the future church, and will need our prayers to continue the mission which Christ has called us to serve through all the ages.

Go and live lives of faithfulness to our God, for you are the inheritors of Jesus Christ's promise, and we are forever joined to him and all who are his children.

Thanks be to God. Amen.