



**“The Saints in Our Lives”**  
**Scripture – Revelation 21:1-6**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, November 1, 2015**

This is a sacred day on the church calendar for excavating our memory banks. Today we call forth the special people who helped shape us: parents, grandparents, teachers, friends and even historical figures whose lives inspired us to aim a bit higher. Roman Catholics and Protestants do not see this day in the same light, because we lean toward different definitions of the word “saint.” When Roman Catholics speak of saints, they usually refer to a list of specific individuals who lived extraordinarily virtuous lives and have been canonized by the church.

Everyone who follows the teachings of Jesus is called to live a life patterned after his. We are to be just and merciful, compassionate and forgiving, humble and generous. We are to be focused outward, not inward, willing to serve and sacrifice; and to keep a special eye out for those who suffer. However, when we place ourselves under the microscope, most of us are embarrassed by the great gulf between who we are and who God expects us to be.

Occasionally – rarely, but occasionally – there is an individual who strikes awe in others because he/she comes much closer than the rest of us to a Christ-like life. Roman Catholics have a process for bestowing the title “Saint” on such people. We know them as Saint Patrick and Saint Catherine, Saint Francis and Saint Clare, Saint Anthony and Saint Teresa.

Protestants think of saints differently. While acknowledging that over the past 2,000 years, there have been remarkable individuals who made God’s Global All-Star team, we name *all* Christians “saints.” We take our cue from the New Testament. In some of the Apostle Paul’s letters, he refers to everyone in a congregation as a “saint.” For instance, in his Letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.” Thus, it is not only those who are stained-glass window material. Everyone who strives to live a Jesus-focused life can be called a saint.

Can you bring into your consciousness, the people who have been saints for you? Think about those special people who made you *feel* loved and who showed you *how* to love. Recall the virtues you spotted in them and how they became your model. Can you picture someone who showed you how to be kind? Someone who exemplified courage?

No one opens the dictionary to kindness, gets the meaning of the word firmly fixed in his mind, then starts being kind to others. We do not digest the definition of courage and then begin acting bravely. We see someone act with kindness and we copy them. We see someone who is courageous and we try to act the same way. Thomas Aquinas

said that “in order to lead a good life, it is necessary to focus more on our exemplars than on ourselves, imitating their actions as much as possible.”<sup>1</sup>

Today we focus our thoughts on those people who serve as our models. Think for a moment: Who planted within you a desire to be trustworthy? (Take a minute to remember someone.) Can you remember someone who made you want to become generous? (Pause and remember this person.) Was there someone in your life who was a paragon of faithfulness? (Pause.)

Today we honor and thank God for what our unique saints contributed to our lives. For the most part, these are not people whose names are recognizable to the public. Nevertheless, the quality of their character left an imprint on our soul because it was apparent that they answered God’s call to nudge the world in a divine direction. Each of us faces constant temptation to take the low road rather than the high. Express your gratitude to the saints in your life who inspired you to aim for what is noble and commendable.

In addition to thanking our saints, this day summons us to recommit to living as they showed us. Have you found yourself being short-tempered with others? Pledge to your saint who demonstrated self-control that you will recommit to holding the reins on lashing out. Have your dealings with others been less than truthful? Pledge to your saint who showed you the virtue of honesty that you will recommit to being more transparent. Has your spiritual life grown thin? Pledge to your saint who showed you the value of a life of faith that you will recommit to regular worship and living a charitable life.

All Saints’ Day celebrates the saints in our lives who have inspired us to live in Christ-like ways. For many of us, our saints are no longer living, yet their influence on us continues. This morning’s passage from the Revelation to John was written to people whose saints were gone, but whose example continued to inspire. It was near the end of the first century during one of the fiercest periods of persecution that Christians experienced. John wrote to reassure them that those who had died were not lost to God, but in fact, were gathered up by God to live anew. John sketches a scene to provide a glimpse of what we can expect: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God’s people, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.’”

On a beautiful autumn day much like today, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, a revered teacher and poet, was in a park absorbed in contemplation. “He was reflecting on a small beautiful leaf in the shape of a heart. Its color was almost red, and it was barely hanging on the branch, ready to fall. He spent a long time contemplating the leaf and he asked it several questions. He asked the leaf whether it was afraid because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf responded, ‘No. During the whole spring and summer I was very alive. I worked hard and helped nourish the tree, and much of me is in the tree. Please do not say that I am just this form, because the form of leaf is only a tiny part of me. I am the whole tree. I know that I am already inside the tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. That’s why I do not worry. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, ‘I will see you again very soon...’”

Hanh continues: “You should not say, life of the leaf, you should only speak of life *in* the leaf and life *in* the tree...That day there was a wind blowing and, after awhile, he saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree.”<sup>2</sup>

Each of us is like a tree with many leaves. There have been many who have contributed to the person we are today. Some in obvious ways, some in subtle ways. Some we can recall, some are too deep within us to recall. Yet all have helped to shape us and all are still in us.

And like one of the countless leaves on the Great Tree that is the Life of the Universe, we are in God and we will always be a part of God.

As you pause today to remember the saints who enriched your life and brought you joy, thank them for the way they blessed you. Thank them with words in your prayers and thank them through the way you live. Express your gratitude in prayer and in action until that future day when you will be able to thank them face-to-face.

#### NOTES

1. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, (New York: Random House, 2015), p. 107.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Heart of Understanding*, quoted on patheos.org, October 26, 2015.