

The Rev. Stephen B. Klots

Sermon for November 3, 2019—All Saints Sunday—at St. Andrew’s Church, Ken

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

At South Kent School, we follow a tradition for All Saints Day that is becoming more and more difficult each year to fulfill: We remember in chapel before God, by name, all of the deceased graduates, faculty, and staff members of the school. This takes a long time. After all, even though we’re a small school, there are now 751 names on the list—I know because, in planning for this year, I counted. We used to fulfill this tradition in one day—All Saints Day itself—but, about seven or eight years ago, the list simply became too long, and now we dedicate all of what I call “All Saints Week” to reading the names

Our students more or less do well with this. To be sure, I spend quite a bit of time in advance of All Saints Week prepping them for the occasion. I let them know that these people once prayed in the same chapel pews, and they slept in the same dorm rooms, and walked the same walkways, and played on the same athletic fields, and ate in the same dining hall. I let them know that we now worry about the same things they worried about—from college admissions and the SAT to friends and family at home. Indeed, we are no different from them. We are them, and like them, one day, our names will be on that list as well.

It's a daunting thing, reading all the names on the list, but also quite moving, perhaps especially for me, as I hear the names of people I knew—some from long ago, ones even known at this parish, like Charlie Whittemore, a graduate from the Class of 1939 and for years a regular at the 8:30 service here, to the youngest name on the list, a graduate from 2011 by the name of Paul who died this fall from a drug overdose. That was a tough name to read.

The experience this week got me to thinking about our names—what they say about us, and how people know us by them. We have our formal names, we have our common names, and we sometimes even have nicknames. Our names say something about our history, and they suggest something about our relationships. For instance, to most people I am Steve, and that's what my parents call me, but, I have to confess, there were a very few occasions when I was young when my parents addressed me by my full name, perhaps with a note or tone of admonition, as in "Stephen Barrett Klots, stop that right now!" When that happened, they used a different name to express a different relationship with me—that of a concerned or disappointed parent. At South Kent, I am almost always simply called Father, and I don't know how I would react if a student there called me Steve. I don't think it would work because it wouldn't describe the relationship I have with my students.

This experience is not unique to me. My sister Elizabeth is a person of many names. When she was young, she got the nickname Conk—I truly don't know how. Our family now spells that C-o-n-q-u-e-s, but that spelling comes from a town in

France she visited in her teen years with my parents, and where my father duly took a photograph of her in front of the sign at the entrance to the town. Even today, when she calls me on the phone, she'll identify herself as Conques—but I assure you, that's not how she is known at work. It's a family thing, and her office would probably become worried about her if she started signing letters with the name Conques. There are, however, a few people from my childhood who still refer to her as Bittus because, when she was a toddler, one of her young friends could not say the name Elizabeth. It came out as Bittus, and so, to that family and some others in the neighborhood, Bittus is who she became.

What I mean to show by all of this is that names are a powerful thing. They can even describe our relationship with God. Two weeks ago, our Old Testament reading told the story of Jacob wrestling with a being, perhaps an angel of the Lord, at the river Jabbok. At the end of that match, the angel renamed Jacob—and he gave Jacob a new identity—as Israel, a name with many possible meanings, one being the One Who Wrestles with God. It was a name that captured the essence of Jacob's new relationship with God. This same thing happens for in baptism, when we are named. That name, given in baptism, in a way describes our relationship with God as well.

In short, names matter—because they convey something about us, and something about our relationships, and something about our relationship with God. They matter to us, and they matter to God as God has come to know us in Jesus Christ. Today is All Saints Sunday, and in this parish, as we did this past week at

South Kent, we are invited to remember in the prayers before God the names of our loved ones. (In the prayers, I will read off the list of remembrance—the list of names already turned in—and then invite you to add others as you feel moved.) This is a day for names—for the names of our loved ones, but also for the name of Jesus, the name, as today’s Epistle says, that is above every name that is named.

In today’s Gospel, we hear Luke’s account of the Beatitudes, and Jesus’ description of what it means to be a saint. It is much more stark than the more familiar Beatitudes from Matthew. Thus, instead of “blessed are the poor in spirit,” we hear quite simply that “blessed are the poor.” In Luke, Jesus finishes the Beatitudes with a list of commandments that, when followed, provides a good definition of saintliness: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt..” It’s all about being humble and and love and sacrificing oneself and what one can do for others. He sums this up by saying, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

I believe there have been saints out there over the ages who have been such vessels of grace that they met those standards for saintliness nearly all of the time. Most of us, however, mostly muddle along somewhere in the middle. We try our best. We vow to do good. We intend to say our prayers. We strive to be patient and

loving and thoughtful of others. And yet, so often, we **know** when we fall short of **those** standards of holiness and saintliness.

On All Saints Sunday, it is important to remember that we do not just celebrate the faith of a select few, the superheroes of the faith. This is **All** Saints Sunday—in other words, not a day just for the saints we remember in our liturgical calendar, or the ones who have churches named after them, but **all** the saints, including the ones who, in their love, brought grace into our lives. We by name give thanks for God’s ability to use the people in our lives to share his amazing grace—people who, like us, may have had their flaws, and may not have always lived saintly lives, and yet, like us are among God’s beloved. We celebrate them and remember them by their names today too. By God’s grace, the love of God came through their lives to us, and in saying their names, we give thanks to God for their lives. We speak those names because, grounded in our love for them and God’s love for them in Jesus, they also matter to God. We trust that they have come to know, as Ephesians puts it in today’s reading, “what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.”

I think now of all of the men and women I have known across the years who have made a difference in my life—some closely, some distantly—and who have gone to their eternal rest. Yes, there were priests who mentored me, teachers who taught me, and grandparents who loved me. Some I knew well, and some were simply adults who were kind to me when I was child. Some of them called me Steve, a few of them might have wanted to call me in warning by my full name, and some

indeed called me Father. Some of them were greatly blessed, and some endured great sorrows—I'm thinking, for instance, of that young alumnus named Paul who was buried a few weeks ago. None of them was perfect, but somehow God's grace was present in their lives and they made a difference in mine.

I am sure, if you think over the years of your lives, you can do the same with the many people you have known and loved. Perhaps you called that person by his or her baptismal name. Maybe you and those people had nicknames for each other. Undoubtedly there are some whose absence now still and always will fill you with sadness. You would want nothing more than to have that person or those persons sitting next to you in your pew today. Even so, when we say their names today, we assert our belief in the God of compassion and resurrection, who in Jesus, wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus, and who also loves us and those who have gone before us so much that he went to the cross and, in the words of the Apostles' Creed, descended to the dead. Yes, there **is** power to saying their names, and there is especially power in the name of Jesus.

On this day, on All Saints Day, we remember all of these people who are now in the everlasting and loving embrace of God, trusting that God knows each one of them by name, and loves each one of them as His son or daughter. For and with them, we sing the words of this day's great hymn: "For all the saints, who from their labors rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed, thy Name, O Jesus, be forever blessed"—and, when we leave here, we are invited to go on with our lives, to go on

with our stumbling attempts to be gracious, holy, and saintly to each other and to those we meet along the way. In the end, with the ones we name today, we know that nothing—not our own shortcomings, not our own flaws, not our own sins, and not even death—can separate us from the love of God for us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.