

Date Preached

31-Oct-2021

Date Initiated

19-Oct-2021

Where Preached

SAK

Appointed Readings

All Saints', Yr B

*(seated)* I'd like to take a moment of pastoral privilege before I begin my sermon, proper. We have experienced here in town and heard reports from across Connecticut and the nation of increasing incivility and intimidation under the banner of the exercise of First Amendment rights. Four-letter words hurled, in protest, in the presence of small children and emblazoned on flags and bumpers. Refusing to listen to our opponents ... or even allow them to speak. A viewer who writes to national political commentator with whom he disagrees, "I want you gone. Dead. Caput. Fini [sic]. Get it?" The unilateral throwing around of one's weight—in both word and deed—seems, more and more, to have gained acceptance as a mode of civic engagement ... of legitimate political discourse.

It is error to, in any way, equate the civil liberties we enjoy as Americans and the grace of Jesus Christ we partake in as His disciples; but we are, I believe, called—by God—to use them in much the same manner: as hoes and shovels, for tending to the common good and the building up of all ... and not as clubs and cudgels, for the advancement of individual points-of-view without regard to the propriety and impact of our actions. Holding our liberties lightly while fully embracing our duty to honor and care for one another may yet rescue the so-called American way-of-life from collapsing under its own weight. The opposite, I am afraid, is a sure path to its ruin. In this, as in all things, may God help us.

" [Y]ou, O God, have knit together your elect  
in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of ... Christ our Lord "



It makes you pause a moment, doesn't it, when art reflects life back at you. I noticed this recently while watching some television programs and movies set in the time of COVID. The characters are often masked and maintaining social distance. In many scenes, only two or three actors appear: The long-smoldering showdown takes place at a kitchen table and not a crowded train station. A wedding is set at an almost empty beach, rather than in a packed church.

This pricked me, I think, because the 'other' of fiction was evoking the actual—and often difficult—realities we've been forced to contend with in living with COVID. Many of you have shared with me, over the last several months, that the least bearable, most enervating consequence of the pandemic has been the constant drip of small-but-still-significant changes and adjustments we've had to accept: the little indignities and constant reminders of invisible contagion. Social networks disrupted ... treasured traditions suppressed ... natural rhythms of life—even, for a while, church on Sunday mornings—hijacked. You've tallied for me, in sorrow ... in anger ... and in resignation, how much COVID has taken away from you; ultimately yielding a prolonged, silent absence-of-normal that threatens to crush us in despair.

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Today, we observe the Feast of All Saints<sup>1</sup>: the Church's annual celebration of all the faithful, holy disciples whose Christian lives "were distinguished and exemplary because of their self-sacrifice, witness, virtue, or accomplishments."<sup>2</sup> The 'household name' saints—Mary, John the Baptist, Stephen—all have feast days of their own, but today we lift up and give thanks for the witness and example of *every* saint: many much more humble than heroic.<sup>3</sup> For although our imaginations are captivated by those who have faced ravenous beasts in a colosseum<sup>4</sup> or the steely rifles of a firing squad<sup>5</sup>; by those who have left everything behind, to dedicate themselves to prayer and meditation<sup>6</sup>; and by those who sacrificed their lives in the name of conscience and justice<sup>7</sup> ... heroism—at least in the common sense of the word—has never been a criterion for sainthood. The Episcopal Church's official index of saints<sup>8</sup> is filled with those whose lives ... whose faiths ... whose commitments to Christ ... were marked more by patience than passion; more by constancy than charisma:

- Florence Li Tim-Oi [24 Jan]: the first woman ordained as a priest in the Anglican Communion, in Hong Kong, in 1944—a full *thirty years* before any other Church in the Communion regularized the ordination of female priests. The storm of condemnation this sparked around the world caused her to surrender her priest's license in 1947. And then, in China, the 1949 Communist Revolution and the 1958 Cultural Revolution, which branded her a counter-revolutionary, meant Florence would not again serve as a priest for more than *thirty years*.
- Anna Ellison Butler Alexander [24 Sept]: born in the Jim Crow South to parents who had been slaves. Anna was tirelessly devoted to the education of Black children in Georgia, where the squalid conditions and grossly inadequate resources of the Black-only schools were mirrored by the separate-but-unequal sub-diocese into which all Black Episcopalians were herded, by an oppressive white Church, until 1947. Known for traveling hundreds of miles, on foot and by rowboat, to serve the poor—white and Black, alike—across rural Glynn County, Anna was, grudgingly, ordained a deaconess—

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<sup>1</sup> I will admit that I have played a little fast-and-loose with the liturgical calendar in placing this observance on 31 October. All Saints' Day, proper, falls on 01 November. *The Book of Common Prayer* permits an additional observance of All Saints' on the Sunday after that date, as well. This year, however, St Andrew's more or less ran out of Sundays! If we were to observe both our patronal feast and Christ the King before the beginning of Advent, this 'anticipatory' observance of All Saints was basically our only option. Please don't tell the bishops!

<sup>2</sup> From *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church* ([www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/)).

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, some so humble that they're known only to God.

<sup>4</sup> *E.g.*, Perpetua and Felicity [07 Mar].

<sup>5</sup> *E.g.*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer [09 Apr]; Martyrs of Uganda [16 Feb]; Martyrs of the Reformation Era [05 May].

<sup>6</sup> *E.g.*, Antony of Egypt [17 Jan]; Julian of Norwich [08 May].

<sup>7</sup> *E.g.*, Óscar Romero [24 Mar]; Fabian [20 Jan].

<sup>8</sup> The Church is in a (seemingly perpetual) season of re-evaluating its list of officially sanctioned saints, and there are actually several indices that are either authorized or approved for trial use. I personally follow the edition of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* that General Convention approved for use, in 2018.

in fact, the *only* Black deaconess<sup>9</sup> the Episcopal Church *ever* ordained—in 1907.

- Joseph Schereschewsky [14 Oct]: a Jewish-born Lithuanian immigrant to America, who became a gifted linguist and bishop. Schereschewsky was committed to bringing the Bible and the Prayer Book to Chinese people in their own language. Severely paralyzed, he spent more than twenty years sitting at a desk and typing over two thousand pages of translation with just the middle finger of one hand.

Florence, Anna and Joseph. The ordinary names of ordinary people who became saints for doing ordinary things ... in *extraordinary* ways. Neither mystics nor monastics nor martyrs, their saintliness was expressed in the prolonged, silent absence-of-normal ... the deprivation of dignity and accustomed autonomy ... that our COVID selves have come to know so well: a life checked by externals that cannot be controlled; the frustration of knowing what could be ... but having to live with what *is*; the insult of having to pare down dreams and compromise potentials, over and over again, in the face of overwhelming opposition.

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Our inclination, on hearing about the Church's saints, is to marvel at their accomplishments and differentiate their lives from our own. But on *this* All Saints' Day ... in the throes of *this* pandemic ... let us lift up, instead, precisely what we have in *common* with Florence and Anna and Joseph ... and, indeed, with every other saint known to God: Baptism.

- Each of them, like us, was dunked in a river **or** lowered into a pool **or** sprinkled in a font and washed clean of their sins; sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.
- Each of them, like us, died, spiritually, to the ugly, angry, defeatist aspects of their human natures and was reborn into the beauty and promise of salvation in Jesus.
- Each of them, like us, was a fully initiated, heartily welcomed, joyfully received member of the Church, the Body of Christ that knows no limits of time or place; that teaches that our despair and grief and suffering in this life do not stem from God's overlooking or judging us ... but are, in fact, the times and aspects of our lives in which **the** Christ-of-the-Cross is the very *closest* to us.

The waters of Baptism follow, in a single, steady stream from the Holy Spirit ... to Jesus in the Jordan ... to St Peter and St Paul ... to Florence and Anna and Joseph ... and thence, to each and every one of us. In the face of a virus that seeks to absent every norm from our lives, these waters are the bond of God's ever-presence with us. Impervious to COVID's erosion of our psyches, these waters are the seal that holds us, always, in Jesus' perfect love and eternal life.

And so, on this Feast of All Saints, I am choosing to uncover this Font and leave it open indefinitely. On *this* day ... and *every day hereafter* ... let us contemplate ... and soak in ... these baptismal waters, in the company of Florence and Anna and Joseph and all the saints known unto

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the entire order of deaconesses itself bespeaks the separate, but related, sin of sexism. For decades in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, it wasn't thought fitting for women to be admitted to the Order of Deacons.

God: *not* in search of instruction about what we may be called to *do*; but in visual, material confirmation of what we have already been called to *be*: Baptized, with the communion of all saints, in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.



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