

# Sermons at St Paul's

All Saints' Day/translated

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## *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*

Do you ever wonder why we have “saints?” And why they have a special day when we celebrate them? And then, the following day, we have “souls” and celebrate all of them. Saints and souls!

It could feel a little like the A-team and the rest. But I think it is not meant to be the celebrities and us, but more like the moon and the stars – both important, but distinct, and different in their brightness.

The big-name saints – like Peter, Augustine, Theresa of Avila, and Paul – have taught us major things about our life in God, and about being followers of Jesus. The next group of saints – like all those celebrated in churches' names, and beloved ones like Therese of Lisieux and Francis – are models for us in daily life. Then there are saints I have never heard of, whose lives Cliff and Manny read to us at the noon Eucharist on Wednesdays from the book *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*. They come in a wide variety of sizes, shapes and colors, singly, in pairs or small groups. We celebrate them because they convince us that ordinary people can do extraordinary things on behalf of Jesus and the Gospel, and earn the title saint.

So what is a saint? Dr. David Lose, president of Lutheran Seminary down the street, says that what distinguishes them is their vulnerability. They made themselves open to God and to the needs of their community. They did not shut themselves off in self-sufficiency or pride, but like Jesus, became one with those who were suffering. And they were in love with God.

That's what is going on in our Gospel reading today. We hear Luke's version of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount – only this is the Sermon on the Plain. Instead of looking down at the crowd from a mountainside, Luke tells us: “Jesus looked up at his disciples.” This is Jesus being vulnerable and coming to those who need him. In the verses just before our Gospel passage this morning, Jesus has healed the sick and those

suffering from evil spirits. He has patiently accepted all who wish to touch him and receive his blessing. He begins to comfort those who are most vulnerable and fragile: the hungry, the poor, and the grieving, as well as those who have been blamed for following him and listening to him.

And who gets castigated? Those who are selfish and secure – the rich, the smugly satisfied, those who laugh carelessly and are spoken well of – the celebrities of the Roman occupation. Jesus identifies those who will see the upending of their world of luxury as the false prophets of their era.

Why? Because they are smug and satisfied? Not so much, I think. It is as Dr. Lose points out, because they have walled themselves off from God and their neighbors. Jesus makes himself vulnerable, so he can serve those in need. And so do those we call saints.

Our world today seems pretty dark to a lot of people. Many are seriously upset about the upcoming election, about the injustice that seems endemic in our justice system, about refugees and those displaced by violence. People are also very upset about the destruction caused by recent storms, earthquakes and floods, the seismic shifts that technology and climate-changing forces are creating, and by illness and death. This afternoon at 5 pm, our clergy and musicians will lead us in a Requiem Mass to honor those who have died this past year – including The Rev. Charles Carter, our Rector from 1984 to 1995.

Our Rector now, Cliff, has just returned from Cannon Ball, North Dakota, where he went at the invitation of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairman Dave Archambault, to be in solidarity with those peacefully protesting the oil pipeline that is about to be constructed through the Treaty Lands of the Lakota Sioux – lands that they hold sacred. It is a difficult time of year, as well, with darkness arriving in the early evening now. Yes, there is a lot of darkness out there.

That's why we need saints. They are like beacons of hope, showing us the way to God in our experience of darkness. Saints do not deny the darkness, but they know where God is, and they steadfastly move toward the God they love with all their hearts. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower, said that when she succeeded in joining the Carmelite monastery where she would live out her brief life, that her friend Jesus went to

sleep in her little boat, and never spoke to her again. Mother Teresa of Calcutta confessed to experiencing terrible and frightening periods of darkness as she went out to nurse the poorest and the dying in that city. Yes, saints know about the darkness, but they also know deep in their souls about God, and that God's first name is Love.

And so they shine for us. That shining quality of saints is huge. It might explain the haloes that medieval artists showed them wearing. They shone so brightly that anyone could see it. So the really big-name saints are like lanterns. You can turn one on, and see that it is shining right in broad daylight.

And the medium-size name saints are more like flashlights. They shine, but sometimes you have to be pretty close to them to see just how bright and steady their lights really are.

And then, there are the ordinary saints – you and me. Each one of us is like a little light that shines out every time we do something kind, something loving, something that takes us out of our own small world into another person's need. It may be a bit hard to see that little light of yours. You may not even be aware of your own little light unless someone enters your darkness and does something that shows it to you.

A friend of mine, who just celebrated his 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary from high school last year, was stunned when a woman sent him an e-mail after finding his address on the reunion website. She told him that when he was the football captain, she was experiencing darkness in an abusive family. He would just say "Good Morning" to her every day as they passed on the staircase while changing classes. He thought nothing of it. For her, it was a true light in her darkness – the captain of the school football team cared enough about her to say Good Morning! Fifty years later, she told him how much that light mattered in her darkness.

You see, here's the thing about being a saint. The lantern and the flashlight shine clearly even during the day. But the little light in our souls shines most clearly, is seen most easily, the darker it gets.

Shine your light of love, respect, kindness and care brightly into the darkness this week, my friend. Jesus is walking right beside you. You are shining the way toward our loving God.

*Amen.*