

Frederick Buechner writes: "In God's holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a pocket handkerchief. These handkerchiefs we call saints." Isn't that great? The saints are God's coy, casually-dropped reminders of God's presence; all full of the perfume of God's love; one whiff and we are transported with the imaginings of a life immersed in that love. Now Buechner is careful to point out that the saints are rarely moral exemplars, citing Saul who became Paul as well as St. Augustine, who in his *Confessions* wrote, "Lord, give me chastity, but not now." Buechner notes of these somewhat faded handkerchiefs, "In other words, the feet of saints are as much of clay as everybody else's, and their sainthood consists less of what they have done than of what God has for some reason chosen to do through them."

Buechner points to a common understanding of "sainthood" in the Christian tradition. The saints are those rare individual men and women whom God has chosen to shine especially bright with the light of God. Early on "The Church" – today continued in the Roman Catholic tradition – set up an elaborate system by which these extraordinary handkerchiefs of light could be designated as a saint with a capital "St."

There is another understanding that more closely resembles our Anglican tradition of the saints. We hear it in the well-known hymn, "I Sing A Song of the Saints of God," where in the last verse we sing, "the world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will. You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea, for the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too." This is not just a children's hymn; it is our theology; it is why we speak of the "communion of saints." Our Book of Common Prayer defines the communion of saints as, "The whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise." That sounds like just about everybody! By our baptism and our weekly gatherings around this table we are caught up in the whole family of God, the communion of the saints.

Perhaps that is why on All Saints Day Anglican and Episcopal Churches across many nations have come to the practice of praying for those who have gone before us even though they do not have a big "St." in front of their names. In a short while we will lift up a great many of these folks by name as we celebrate All Saints Day on this Sunday. Now by Buechner's reckoning not all of these folks fall into that special category of saints that he describes. They cannot all be profound beacons of light, right? They can't all be perfumed hankies, can they? Or can they? Perhaps the reason we lift up in prayer our loved ones who have departed is because we know that they too possess the light of Christ. Even the most incorrigible of them has that ember of love that we wish to blow on and enlarge. And perhaps we do pray for their life beyond this world because we recognize that God is not done with any of us, even after we depart this life. Death is not the end.

Our lessons this morning all point to this reality. In Isaiah we hear of the gathering of all God's people on a holy mountain, where death is swallowed up forever, where all of God's children – living and dead – gather in new life in a feast not unlike the one at which we gather at this table each week. In our reading from Revelation the creation of a new heaven and a new earth is imagined as a blurring of those two entities, where "the home of God is among mortals," where "death will be no more," where the one seated on the throne is "making all things new." And in our gospel reading Jesus brings Lazareth from the stench of death, freeing his friend from death. "Unbind him and let him go," Jesus commands. The bindings of death can no longer contain Lazareth. He is not finished.

I suppose that when I consider the saints of both heaven and earth I cannot help but think of one other bit of scripture, that terrifying one-line hand grenade that Jesus tosses out in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount. At the end of the section where Jesus is teaching about love (you know the one: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But

I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...). Yes, that lovely section. And at the conclusion, Jesus sums it all by saying, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." I can tell you that the first time I read that as an adult returning to the church after a prolonged absence I thought, "Well, we can just forget going any further. Perfection is not going to happen to Bill Combs!" That much I knew. But later, I learned that the Greek here is rather different, and that this is one of those places where the New Revised Standard Version just doesn't do a good job of translating. The word we hear as "perfect" – *telios* – means, "complete, whole, full-grown." And the Greek tense is future, pointing towards becoming. "Become whole, complete, full-grown, therefore, as your heavenly Father is complete." This is indeed the journey of all our lives, to become whole, to become completely whom God created us to be. The saints – by my estimation – are the folks who are leaning into that becoming, regardless of which side of the grave they might find themselves.

Jeremy Taylor, a theologian and writer in the 17th century, is one of the "Caroline Divines" – a designation for a group of extraordinary Anglican theologians during the reign of Charles I. In his work, *Holy Dying* Taylor speaks of this process: "If, our childhood being first consecrated by a forward baptism, it be seconded by a holy education and a complying obedience; if our youth be chaste and temperate, modest and industrious, proceeding through a prudent and sober [adulthood] to an old age loving God; then we have lived our whole duration, and shall never die, but be changed ...to the preparations of a better and an immortal life." We shall never die, but be changed. I steadfastly believe that our physical death is not the end of our becoming.

We are all likely familiar with the Catholic concept of purgatory, that between the endpoints of salvation and damnation there exists a "waystation" for heaven-bound folks to "sweat off" their remaining sins through suffering before they are purified enough to enter heaven. Purgatory fell out of favor with Protestant reformers, largely because clergy were receiving special gifts in exchange for the promise that the giver would spend less time sweating things off. Greed and corruption did in what I believe to be a useful and true concept (not the suffering part, which draws upon a theology of a wrathful and vindictive God). What I embrace is the ongoing process of growth after this life. And in this I am not alone. In our Burial Office we pray: "Grant that, increasing in the knowledge and love of thee, he/she may go from strength to strength in the life of perfect service in thy heavenly kingdom." And weekly at the 8:00 service we pray: "And we also bless thy holy Name for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear, beseeching thee to grant them continual growth in thy love and service." None of us leave this world in *telios*, a state of wholeness and completion. Our lives in God are a continual movement towards love, a movement towards fullness. Perhaps this is why we reaffirm our Baptismal vows on this occasion, restating our commitment to this growth in love. And perhaps this is why we pray for those who have gone before us, that they may continue to grow in God's love as well. In these movements – quoting Taylor – we never die, but we are changed.

And so this day we celebrate the saints: the marquee players like Mary and Paul and Augustine and Teresa; we celebrate those who did not earn the big "St." in this life; we celebrate those who are beside us in the store, at work, in these pews; we celebrate even me and you. This day we celebrate the grace of God that allows for the ceaseless movement toward love. We celebrate the voices who have sung that love into being in ages past, and we celebrate the voices of this communion of saints who harmonize the melody that is our life with theirs. In our movement we carry with us a tone that joins in the symphony of voices that stretch back before time. May our joyful music sing the praises of our God, the source of life and love, the author of salvation, the eternal dropper of handkerchiefs.