Saints Alive!

As I was preparing for the sermon this week, I learned something interesting about the history of All Saints’ Day. We Presbyterians have only officially celebrated this special church holiday since 1932! That’s the year the first Book of Common Worship was published, linking the major Mainline denominations in the United States, and helping us follow the same church calendar and common lectionary. Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Reformed Church and Presbyterians, the UCC, the Disciples of Christ, the American Baptists, and many Unitarians, Mennonites, and even some Catholic churches agreed to work together, to follow the same calendar, and use the same schedule of readings in Worship. Some of the churches are more flexible about it than others, but at least there was unity in concept!

But why did Presbyterians not have an All Saints Day before then? The primary reason is, of course, that most Protestants had negative associations with the word “saints.” In the thirty years war and the religious league wars of the Reformation, “saint” became associated with “Papist Propaganda.” The Scots Confession, in particular, is filled with vitriol over the Catholic church and the connection to saints. And, in fairness to the Reformers, Protestant theology leaned heavily into the idea of the “Priesthood of all Believers” – that there was no need for an intermediary between your prayers and God. Instead of praying to the Saints and asking them to put a good word in with God, Protestants believe we can ask God directly – and confess to God directly, too.

But, while we have differing understanding of what a saint is, the concept of telling stories of God’s action in our lives is still strongly with us. Indeed, for us, a saint is not a separate, “almost-perfect” person to emulate – but someone who is trying their best to follow God’s way. This is how Protestants think about saints today – just as we have the “priesthood of all believers”, to some extent, we have the “sainthood of all believers”, too. Technically, the term sanctification means the lifelong process of a believer making choices to live more in the Way that Jesus has taught us.

In the Moravian church - which is one of the earliest Protestant denominations, predating even Luther – members are encouraged to write spiritual autobiographies, noting especially places where God’s presence was felt in their lives. Libraries full of these autobiographies are available for members and non-members alike to read in Moravian communities throughout the world. These are still a valuable resource to people to be inspired by the lives, choices, and actions of those who have come before them. In many ways, these stories of divine connection serve as windows into the “saints” of the church – the ordinary people, whom have encountered the divine acting in their lives. We’re all, in a way, saints alive!

We can also see this in ways that we teach people to follow the faith, whether as children or as adults. Psalm 38, for example, gives us wonderful advice, wherever we are in our faith journey. The Psalmist encourages us to follow God’s way, by blessing and praising God, honoring God and being radiant with joy in God’s presence. How does one honor God? By telling the truth, turning from evil, seeking peace and going after it. Praise God, honor God by always being truthful, turn from evil, and you will be radiant with God’s joy. It’s a simple premise – and, truthfully, sanctification sounds simple on the surface. Once you have committed to follow God’s Way, then follow it.

Of course, nothing is as easy as it seems. But God promises to be there through it all – God was there before you even committed to start on the path, and God will still be there holding you when your baptism is complete and you transition to heaven. The Psalmist even says, “the righteous have many problems, but the Lord delivers them from every one.” No matter what you face in life, God is there with you. And when your journey is complete, you will be with God, delivered from even the memory of evil, pain, and suffering!

Even when things are at their worst, the Psalmist reminds us to “taste and see that the Lord is good – Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in God!” Christians connect this with the communion table, of course – tasting the goodness of God through the grace-filled sacrament. Beyond this connection, though, is the idea that when you most need to take refuge with God, God will provide for you. At the most basic needs, God provides. Food, drink and shelter are wrapped in God’s love for you – with every taste you experience, you can recognize God’s presence. To extend the metaphor, every bite of food is alive with God’s presence. Every shelter from the wind and rain is alive with God’s presence. Every breath you take is alive with God’s presence. To recognize this is to lean into being a saint alive!

Of course, the saints alive today will transition to the saints eternal and triumphant, as has always happened. John the Revelator experienced something of this, through his dreams and visions during his exile on Patmos:

I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands.

John notes that the people come from everywhere, knowing in the divine vision what would be impossible to know at a glance. They are beyond counting – and are varied in feature and language while still being unified in their symbols of victory, the white robe and palm branch. It testifies simultaneously to the universal scope of God’s love and salvation and to God’s ultimate victory over pain, evil, and violence. It shows John – and through his writing, us – that God’s plan of redemption extends far beyond whatever boundaries we might impose on it. It dismantles notions of exclusivity, and leads us to embrace a vision of God’s family – of the saints alive and saints beyond – who transcend cultural, linguistic, and ethnic barriers. We saints alive are blessed to be a part of this boundless reach of God’s grace, with all those who have gone before us.

John’s revelation also includes a difficult vision – that the white robes worn by the multitude are made white by being “washed in the blood of the Lamb.” There are songs and songs that use this rather disturbing description for all sorts of purposes, but I do not plan to do so today. Instead, I want to note two things – first, that the process of sanctification does not begin with anything we do or choose. Instead, it is God’s own actions of salvation, of Jesus’ sacrificial love for all the world, that makes it possible for us to be saints alive and saints beyond life. The “blood of the Lamb” is the paradox of life and death – but ultimately, it is in God’s initiating action in which we are saved. This is justification – the start of the sanctification process. We are made right with God through God’s own action, and not through our own. Yet, we still take the time to wash our robes carefully – the profound spiritual cleansing and renewal through our faith journey. We are called to respond to God’s grace and love with gratitude, and doing our best to follow in God’s Holy Way.

The saints we remember on this All Saints Day are people like us, with flaws, imperfections, and vulnerabilities. But they opened themselves to God’s transformational love. They embraced their calling with humility and trust, allowing God’s grace to work through them. And through learning their stories, we are likewise called to share God’s love in our lives.

How do we keep acting as saints alive? By being vessels of God’s love, extending that love through a hand of welcome and acceptance to all. By speaking truth and turning from evil. By telling our stories – and showing how God has been at work in our lives, as we take refuge in God when things are at their worst, and share the best of God’s radiant joy in everything we do.

As we reflect on the saints who have gone before us, and those who stand among us today, it is clear that God’s love is active in the power of unity in diversity. Just as the many denominations found common ground in the Book of Common Worship, despite their differing understandings of what being a saint alive means to them, we are united in our belief that God’s transformative love is at the heart of our faith.

After all, we see God’s love transforming us in different ways, yet with the same core. Unity in God’s love does not require uniformity in our experiences. Let us continue to tell our unique stores of God’s work in our lives, for they are a testament to the richness of God’s love. May we be inspired by the unity we find in God and the diversity we cherish in one another. As we taste and see that the Lord is good, may we continue to be transformed by God’s love. May we follow in Christ’s Way, as saints alive. And may the Spirit guide us always to remember the lives of those who have gone before us, as saints beyond, until we are united again in heaven and the new life to come! Amen.