

November 2, 2025—Feast of All Saints
The Rev. James Wyatt

For All the Saints

This past week, I was listening to the Working Preacher podcast, which is a super helpful resource that's a regular part of my sermon preparation every week. It's a group of three scholars and preachers who dive into the lectionary readings each week, and really they're wonderful, but suddenly this week I found myself thinking, "Oh, they're so *Protestant!*" Which, I mean, we are too. But one of the professors on this podcast took pains to point out that in the Bible, the word "saint" is only ever used to mean "all believers." And he said it in a way that felt a little dismissive of sort of the whole of Christian history *after* the Bible, which is a whole lot of history and tradition to sweep under the rug. But yes, that is how the word is used in the Bible. You can see one good example of that in our reading from Ephesians this morning: "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints"—clearly, this is about loving all the people of God, all who are following the way of Jesus Christ.

But the early church recognized very early on that the faith, the lives, the examples of some of the saints were worth remembering, celebrating, and emulating. You can see that even within the New Testament. Paul acknowledges the particular authority and position of respect held by the apostles, the people who learned directly from Jesus himself. And somewhat amazingly, as Lillian pointed out in Bible study on Tuesday, those same apostles seem to have recognized that Paul, though he never knew Jesus in life, clearly knew the resurrected Christ, and they accepted Paul as an apostle in his own right, the apostle to the Gentiles, which was a pretty special status. And then you can look at the letters within the New Testament that scholars call "deutero-Pauline" and I like to call "faux Paul." Faithful Christians who lived after Paul's death wrote letters that look a lot like Paul's letters and draw on many of the same ideas and themes and attached Paul's name to them—not because they were being dishonest or deceptive but because they recognized that Paul was a significant figure whose faith, understanding, and leadership were worth emulating. And then by the time the book of Revelation was written, Christians had the idea that martyrs—those who had been killed because of their faith in Jesus—held a special place in the faith, and they're described as having a special place around the throne of God. So it's true that nowhere in the New Testament is there a word that means "saint" in the sense of someone who is especially holy, but the seeds of the idea are certainly there.

So in the Episcopal tradition, inhabiting as we do the middle way between the Roman Catholic and Protestant roads, we don't have an elaborate process for canonizing saints based on evidence of miracles or any of that, and we don't just sort of collapse the feast of All Saints, on November 1, together with the feast of All Souls on November 2—which is more or less what All Saints has become in the Protestant churches that observe it. We often name our churches after saints. And we have a calendar of feasts, both major and lesser, for a whole, wide variety of saints, from the apostles, whose feasts are major feasts, to various inspirational figures from the whole range of history, down to the 20th century. We have a wonderful book called Lesser Feasts and Fasts that includes little biographies of all the saints whose names have been entered into our calendar of holy days.

And the reason we do that became really clear to me as we were talking about Bishop Budde's book, *How We Learn to Be Brave*, on Wednesday night this week. I was struck by how Bishop Budde filled her book with stories from the lives of the saints—saints like Martin Luther King, Jr., saints like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, saints like Pauli Murray, saints like Jonathan Myrick Daniels, all of whom appear on the calendar of feasts in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. And she also tells the stories of saints like former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, like Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, and like Rod Hardy, a man in a congregation she served who died of cancer shortly after she became bishop of Washington. Those are saints whose names don't appear in *Lesser*

Feasts and Fasts, at least not yet. But their stories are no less inspirational and their lives are no less worthy of emulation.

And that is the point. Bishop Budde tells the stories of these saints as examples of how we learn to be brave, as the title of her book suggests. She tells their stories because their faith and the example of their lives hold good lessons for us. She tells their stories so that we may know “what is the hope to which [God] has called [us], what are the riches of [God’s] glorious inheritance among the saints,” as the letter to the Ephesians puts it. (Eph. 1:18)

When we read and remember and retell the stories of the saints, we do it in the hope that these people still have something to teach us, something about how to do this following Jesus thing. I think, fundamentally, we look to the lives of the saints to remind us that everything Jesus says in that last paragraph of our Gospel reading this morning—“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you,” turn the other cheek, give your shirt as well as your cloak, “Give to everyone who begs from you,” and “Do to others as you would have them do to you”—the lives of the saints remind us that, yes, all that is hard.

And, more importantly, they also remind us that all that is possible. Different saints might shed light on different parts of what it means to walk in the way of love, to respond to life’s challenges with love, to live out Jesus’s difficult call here. And that’s the beauty of it, really. Spend enough time with the stories of the saints, and you’re bound to find someone who has faced a challenge like whatever might be facing you, and has greeted that challenge with love. So maybe, just maybe, you can do the same.

Hopefully, the beloved dead whose names we lift up to God today are also saints who inspire you in your life of faith. I know that when I think about my mother, the thing I always used to joke about was how I couldn’t walk down the street with her without stopping to talk to like ten people she knew. But that’s not because she was a social butterfly, it’s because she was such a devoted servant to her community. She described herself as “an indefatigable volunteer”: she devoted her life to selfless service for causes related to children, women, health, and justice. She served on the board of half a dozen different nonprofits, and ended up being the primary tech support and TV station producer for the retirement community where she spent her last nineteen years of life. She taught me that the only thing there is to fear in death is a life un-lived, which was not something that she ever needed to worry about.

Bishop Budde quotes Bishop Curry’s book *Love Is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubled Times*, where he writes, “Love is not always easy, but like with muscles we get stronger both with repetition and as the burden gets heavier.” I like that idea that love is like muscles we can exercise to make it stronger. I think we learn how to work those muscles by looking at the lives of the saints. And we exercise those muscles as we practice loving each other in community, loving people who are different from us, who are not part of our families, who come from a range of backgrounds and families and cultural experiences. We practice loving each other, building and strengthening those muscles so that when the need arises, we can step up to the plate and act with courage and with love, following the example of the saints who have gone before us—both the ones whose lives are written in books like *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* and, just as important, those whose lives are written into every breath of our own lives.

May all the saints be reminders to us that these words of Jesus, as hard as they are, are possible, and may they inspire us to live and to die in love, always in love.

Amen.