

SERMON - THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS – 4 NOVEMBER 2018

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

The Feast of All Saints

Ps. 31

Rev. 7: 9-17

My. 5: 1-11

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

In 2002 my grandmother, Bertha Menees, died at the age of 102. By most any modern measure a remarkable woman, she lived at home and was independent. Cooking, gardening, raking leaves before family gatherings were still activities quite normal for her. Her passing was remarkable in that she had seemed timeless, changing little over a 35 year span.

When the time came to clear her home of 80+ years it was not unlike an archeological expedition! Every check written from the inception of such banking activities had been saved, placed in proper order, and stored in order in boxes under the bed. An original land grant document from 1782 lay alongside a letter from Andrew Johnson, 17th President of the U.S. written to her grandfather. They had neighboring farms. There were even coins from the late 18th century stacked in medicine bottles. I wish you could have known her even as I wish I could have known all those we commemorate today—living texts with wondrous stories to tell.

We never knew her middle name, and when asked she would say, Bertha is bad enough, so let's not add anything else to it. What she never realized is the name, Bertha, is Germanic and means, bright or shining; one who beams or illumines, and it fit her well. Somehow in her presence there was always an acceptance and grace that left everyone enriched, and made life's moments a little brighter.

When I prepared to go off to University to study everyone in the family had advice to give, which was sure to guard me from: failure, too much partying, and the opportunity to embarrass myself. But my grandmother had only one small word to add to the stack—"Remember Who you are"!!

Today we come together to remember; who we are, who we have had in our lives that have made a mark on us, and to whom we all belong, both living and dead now and for eternity. As people in the great Christian Tradition who confess that we believe in the communion of saints and life everlasting, this is one day where past, present, and future come together, and we are given a chance to see a little more clearly what is true.

In the text from St. Matthew's Gospel known as the Beatitudes we get a glimpse first of who we are, and what life in the reign of God looks like. We are people who seek peace and who mourn our losses; who hunger and seek to be filled; who hope to find mercy and give it as well. When my grandmother told me to remember who you are, she was first reminding me that I am not alone, nor am I self-generated and independent of all who have come before me. None of us would be here without the gift of our families who brought us life and formed the web of relationships that created the experiences and values we hold as our own. In short, no one here today stands alone or solitary; we have been knit together by numerous bonds. We have been given by the lives and history of our families and loved ones all that makes us who we are today. It is the light they have shined on us that lives on in our joys, hopes, sorrows, and endeavors. We are blessed in those connections.

But there is also an element of freedom in who we are. We have been gifted with choices and options to take what we have been given and use them to further the light and faith our loved

SERMON - THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS – 4 NOVEMBER 2018

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

ones have bequeathed us. So, we too, step into this Communion of Saints and add our own distinctive actions to the chain that is being woven. Who we are now, is not just predetermined by our heritage and particular families or origin, but is taken into God's family where there is a richness beyond that which any single person can claim or create.

This is where we cross over from simply being who we are to Whose we are. Today we are gathered in this moment for 2 reasons; one is that we have experienced the loss of someone integral to our lives, and two, we do so as people who belong to God—the One who made us in the divine image and holds us and all who have gone before us in remarkable love and care, which even death cannot break or prevent.

This day is called All Saints. I suspect most of us have some inner image of what makes a person a saint. Often it is the picture of a person who has risen above the struggles of life, or who has conquered anger and hatred, or managed to live outside the normal rough and tumble that seems quite normal to the rest of us mere mortals. And there is a sense in which saintly life is seeing perhaps more clearly than usual what it means to trust God above all things and live in reliance on God's Grace and direction. But, I think what this day calls us to ponder is something a bit more grounded in everyday life, like the Beatitudes themselves. I think the saints are those folk we have known and loved who have stumbled, fallen, lived in the shadows of their failures, grappled with the regrets of not having been all they would have been, and in those moments of darkness stood solely relying on the God who in mercy and love alone could sustain them to let go of their guilt and regrets and trust that there is more to life than our shortcomings. And that "more" is the future which is held in God's love. When we look at these fallible souls who have continued to live in hope, we start to see a light that shines through them. They become living signposts to us of the God who holds the future and us in His mercy. Our recollections today of our loved ones may be that at times they were like Atlas holding the world and at other times scoundrels, but that is not the focus of All Saints. The real point is on God who gave them life, sustained their efforts, forgave their sins, and urged them to the future, and their willingness to trust that is like a lighthouse whose beam allows us to see what really matters.

This past week as I was praying Matins, or Morning Prayer one of those rare moments of clarity was granted. I thought back not only about those who had showed me a path through twisted times or offered words of encouragement when I had none in myself, but about those who had disappointed me. And I realized that they, too, were a gift from God. They reminded me that even in brokenness and struggle God is present and waiting to make all things new.

The day of All Saints is a moment in time to see the small and the great lights that God shines through His peculiar people, for saints have but one true purpose; that is to point us who are still on our journey to the relationship where true hope, solid comfort, peace which impacts us and those around us can be found. They remind us that in God we are knit together across time and space, life and death to form a community where peace rather than turbulence, comfort rather than hopelessness, grace rather than guilt, and love rather than hate or apathy direct our coming and finally our passing. Amen+