

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

Anyone who has attended St. John’s for even a micrometer of time will recognize that a gathering here consists of real human connections and a deep love for food. If you leave a fellowship time or meal hungry, you have no one to fault but yourself! It will come as no surprise that there are great cooks here. It will also come as old news that your priest loves to cook because he loves food! We have discovered a great sandwich recipe: bacon, lettuce, and tomato caprese. It starts with sourdough bread, pesto aioli, thick cut bacon and tomato, and fried mozzarella cheese sticks. But the finishing touch goes to the balsamic reduction. You have likely made sauces in your own kitchens, but balsamic vinegar is its own unique aromatic experience. The result of the reduction is a thick and wonderful flavor, but the effect of standing over it and stirring is an assault on the sinuses. Reductions must be handled with care.

This is not only true in the culinary world; it is also true in life. We live in a time when the inclination is to seek too simple answers to complex issues. We reduce education to gaining a set of skills rather than learning the wisdom of the ages and how to think. We equate politics to power. We conflate truth to being equivalent to feeling good about something. And, there is the ever-present threat in science and healthcare of distilling what it means to be a human soul, created in the image of God, to its’ constituent parts chemically or pragmatically. This should leave all of us asking, “What is human life and existence? Is it merely a sum of its momentary and measurable parts only to be eventually lost?” The writer of the Wisdom of Solomon puts it differently; “But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died and their departure to be an affliction...but they are at peace.” As Christians we view the meaning of life and death in a very particular way. We do not reduce the meaning of human life to the specter of death, not death as annihilation.

Today is the Feast of All Saints. We come to this place to do what Christian people for nearly 19 centuries before us have done; to give thanks to God for the lives that have intertwined with ours. Those lives have nurtured and loved us, challenged and provided for us, and allowed us to become who we are, and without them we would be impoverished. The simple truth is we stand on their shoulders; on the shoulders of giants! The opening prayer or collect for today begins, “O Almighty God, who has knit your redeemed people together in one fellowship; in the mystical body of your Son...grant us grace to follow your blessed saints...” The vital word is ONE. It means we have been linked inseparably in a community that neither time nor space nor death divides into Two or Three. The Christian vision is of a communion, a universal neighborhood that remains connected even if surface appearances may lead us to suggest otherwise.

All of us gathered here hold at least 2 things we in common no matter where we have come from. One is we have experienced the loss of a person we have loved and continue to love. They are parents, grandparents, spouses, children, friends, and neighbors, and they have passed from our immediate sight. That experience leaves us with empty places and grief and the task of trying to live on as fully as possible, but the world having become different. The second is that we all come to remember. Remembering is more than the act of simply recalling. Remembrance

in a scriptural sense is to acknowledge the powerful influences that continue in and for us who have been carried by the saints' witness and love of life and God.

Let us consider for a moment the meaning of loss. Most of us have lost items that are important to us. It can be a very unsettling event. If we try to define it we are likely to describe loss as having had something in our possession which we can no longer find. If it is a relationship, it is the experience of missing someone who has been so meaningful to us that the lack of their presence leaves an empty space we cannot manage to fill. There comes with this a sense of being powerless and helpless. Death is the supreme event of loss. Our culture avoids it like the plague, and understandably so, because we tend to see it as ultimate and final. We have reduced the meaning of life to nothingness when death occurs. But the Faith which we celebrate today takes quite another view. It proclaims that in fact nothing is finally lost to God, not even our loved ones. What appears on the surface to be true is really not the case at all. Only from a shallow materialistic perspective are we separated from those we love, and as real as that seems when we suffer, we should not be seduced into hearing this as the final word. In fact, I would suggest to you that the pain of loss may be a gift of grace because it affirms how important someone has been in our basic days. All Saints calls to us to add our voices to the invitatory of Morning Prayer that begins, "In God, all things are alive; come let us adore Him". And so, even though death is something we all have faced, we hear that it too will pass away, for in God all things are alive! Death will face the end of its power.

If you had made a visit around our household when we were growing up, you would have found a menagerie of pets. There were always birds, dogs, farm animals, and assorted creatures. In particular, there was a large and mischievous Siamese cat by the name of TC, short for Top Cat. He had a cry that sounded like an infant, which he used to his advantage, and every dog in the neighborhood was careful to stay out of his path. He liked to get up on the countertop and if you did not respond quickly enough to his calls, he would saunter up to the glasses lined up there and one by one tap them until they fell to the floor and broke. He drove my mother nuts, but somehow managed to live to be 20 in spite of his behavior!! One of his more endearing qualities was that he loved to play with paper bags from the grocery store. A person could hold it up above him and he would attempt to jump up in it as if gravity did not apply in his case. But if the bag were on the floor, he would rush up to it, stick his head inside, think that he was fully hidden, and prepare to pounce on unsuspecting passersby. It never seemed to occur to him that the entire back half of his body was fully exposed. I suspect that our reaction to death and loss carries some of those same mistaken assumptions. Our world seems to believe that if someone can no longer be seen by normal means, then they simply do not exist. That is reductionist materialism. Those whom we commemorate today are not part of our material existence, but this fact does not mean they no longer exist or are no longer a part of our chain of being. The Gospel tells us that they now belong to the communion held in God's keeping of which we, too, are a part. Being gone from sight does not mean no longer existing.

It is fitting that we gather to worship and recognize their lives and impact they have had and continue to have on us. This is the second thing we share. We are called to remember. Remembering is not merely mental recall of the past. Remembering is to step into that world where some things never become past. It is that world where the influence and connections that we share with the Saints is alive and well. This Altar is a symbol of this continuing relationship. We pray toward it and we receive from it. Here God promises to meet us and when we do

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

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worship here, Christ, who holds our kin and loved ones joins us with them for it is in His continued life that they live. Look at that back wall and let your mind remove the structure. For a moment imagine there is no enclosure, but that standing there is a vast array of those who have crossed from death to life sharing with us in this eternal banquet.

WE think of saints as figures in stained glass windows who appear to have reached some level of perfection, and there are those who have journeyed to unique levels of faith. We know well that many whom we recall today had their faults and imperfections. They often failed in work and relationships. Perhaps they failed our hopes and expectations along the way as well. Instead they stand before us today and are called blessed-saints-not due to perfection but because in the end they belong to God as do we. I sometimes refer to them as my "Balcony Friends". They see from another perspective and point of view. They remind me of struggle and success, losses and hopes, and they know now that Grace is greater than all obstacles. They cheer us on in our journey to follow Christ. And I think in ways not fully recognizable to us, they know fully what we know partially; namely that this life is only a portion of what God intends for us. Their lives remain intertwined with ours and they are signs of hope. They call us to remember the One who is our final hope. Eternity is not just time OUT THERE. It is the quality of God's never-failing love which ties together past, present, and future. The Festival of All Saints in the Church's calendar is meant to be a reminder that Christ's love for us holds on both sides of death, and that in Him nothing and no one is lost. We pray for them, and ask that they, too, hold us before the Lord of all Life. Amen+