

All Saints Sunday
Ephesians 1.11-23
November 4, 2007
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

You may have heard about the mealtime tiff between two little boys, Billy and Tommy. Their mom was making pancakes, their favorite breakfast of all, but the first “batch” off the stove had only one pancake in it, so each was elbowing the other out of the way to be sure the lone pancake landed on his plate. The mother said to the older child, “Now, Billy, what would Jesus do?” Billy’s response was to suggest to his little brother, “Tommy, **you** be Jesus!”

Around here, in our faith family of Holy Trinity, we’re blessed with the reverse situation: a lot of people volunteering **themselves** not to **be** Jesus, but to be **like** Jesus, stepping forward gladly and enthusiastically to serve in so many ways.... Some of those Christ-like folks are no longer sitting in these pews, because they entered the church triumphant, the church victorious, the heavenly church in the past year. These include the loved ones whose names are printed in the bulletin this All Saints Weekend, and those whose names you’ll add to the list by speaking them aloud during the prayers of the church.

Some of those brothers and sisters in Christ who are now “in the company of all the saints in light” ministered to us from afar, through their prayers fervently prayed from their sickbeds or from the homes they were too frail to leave. Never think that this community is only the people healthy or mobile enough to join us in worship every weekend. Some of the prayerful pillars of this community are no longer able to come here but are present and powerful in prayer, a Christian’s most precious mode of communication and tool of ministry. One of the dear people who died this past year had to wake up about 5 every morning to take her heart medication. She began her day with a pill for the good of her body and prayer for the good of her soul – and ours. Many of you never met her; but I have no doubt that her faithful prayers along the Way have blessed our faith family’s life and ministry.

Others on that list of those who are now asleep in Christ taught our children in the Sunday School classroom, or taught them by their witness of faithful service in the Sunday School office, week in and week out. One gave the gift of the nearly life-size Nativity set that we gather 'round every Christmas Eve as one of the children places the Baby Jesus in His manger. Another gave the gift of time and bookkeeping talent to our Women of the ELCA for a whole decade. Still another thanked the youth for their Halloween visits, Christmas carols, Valentine's Day treats by donating a whole armful of books to our Sunday School library. They served by worshiping, working, loving God and us and neighbors they'd never met but in whom they believed Christ lived. Some of them took Jesus' words in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats literally, as He intended:

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25.37-40)

People talk about living saints and usually mean those who are known world-wide for enormous acts of compassion affecting thousands of lives, like Mother Teresa. But most living saints never show up on the cover of *Newsweek* or *Time* and don't have foreign dignitaries attending their funerals. When we Lutherans refer to living saints, we include the folks whose names we know, whose faces we recognize, who sometimes beat us out in the race for one of those premium parking spaces in our tiny lot. Like Saint Paul, we're talking about all the baptized, not just those who have died and are ringed 'round God's throne already, those who have swelled the ranks of the church triumphant, but those who are still schlogging along in the “church militant” here below, humble foot soldiers in the service of the Most High God. Living saints in our vocabulary are those who realize they have a **vocation** from God, a divine **calling** to be holy and loving and upright, regardless of what age or their particular **career** is. We mean the

people with whom we rub elbows all the time, the ones who occasionally rub us the wrong way, the ones with whom we engage in ministry in imperfect but nonetheless important ways.

This weekend's All Saints epistle from the Letter to the Ephesians begins with the paying of one of the biggest, best compliments in the whole Bible! Ephesians 1.15-16:

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

The person who wrote that letter hadn't even **met** the people to whom he wrote, but their reputation preceded them in the most wonderful way. Word had spread in a day and age before the Internet, the telephone, the telegraph, and newspapers.... Visitors to the Ephesians had left their town, walked on foot or traveled in carts or ridden on horses or sailed in boats to other places or back home again and they had carried with them stories about the actions of the living saints whom they had met in Ephesus. The Ephesians had a reputation – for faith active in love. It doesn't get any better than that.

That letter refers to all Christians as “the church, which is [Christ's] body” (Ephesians 1.22-23). Here is a two-in-one picture of Christ and photo of Christ's Body, the church. This is my favorite part of our new church directory. From where you're seated in the pews, many of you can see the image of the risen Christ, wearing a white robe and lifting His hands in blessing. The caption underneath is “Holy Trinity Lutheran Church: Where Faith Is Active in Love.” What you can't see or realize, unless you've looked at it up close, is that this picture of the Body of Christ is composed of hundreds of individual photos of Holy Trinity members....

The photos were taken or submitted last spring. Some of the people pictured here have entered the church triumphant between then and now, and are being remembered today. Other people have moved and no longer worship with us in this place. But the wonderful truth is that those folks who have had either a heavenly or an earthly change of address are still part of the

larger Christian family, which is so much larger than Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church that no picture frame in the whole world is big enough to hold them all!

There's a saying by a great Christian preacher who lived centuries ago, named St. John Chrysostom:

Those whom we love and lose are no longer where they were before.
They are now wherever we are.

They are with **us** in memory and in pictures. They are with **God** in heaven. We thank God for the gift of them, for the good news they preached and lived among us, for their faith active in love. We pick up where they left off, with a prayer that others may say of us, too:

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham