

## 10.31.2021 The Feast of All Saints

A couple from Minnesota decided to travel to Florida to thaw out during a particularly icy winter, and planned to stay at the same hotel where they spent their honeymoon 20 years earlier. Because of their hectic schedules, it was difficult for the two of them to coordinate their travel plans. So the husband left Minnesota and flew to Florida on Thursday, while his wife planned to fly down the following day. The husband checked into the hotel, and seeing that there was a computer in his room, decided to send a quick email to his wife. However, when he did so, he accidentally left out one letter in her email address, and sent the message without realizing his mistake.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Houston, a widow was on her way home from her husband's funeral, a man who was a faithful Christian, a friend of God, and was called to heaven after a short illness. When the widow arrived at her house, she decided to check her email, expecting to find some condolence messages from family and friends, but after reading her very first email, she screamed and fainted. The widow's son rushed into the room, found his mother on the floor, and saw on the computer screen an email which read: To my loving wife: I just arrived today, and I'm sure you're surprised to hear from me, but they have computers here now and people are allowed to send emails to their loved ones. Since I just got here, I thought I'd send one to you to let you know that everything has been carefully prepared for your arrival tomorrow. I'm looking forward to seeing you then, and hope your journey turns out to be as uneventful as mine.

What makes that story so funny is the fact that we can all relate to the terror this widow felt when she thought her time on this earth was over. Death is our greatest enemy, an enemy we do everything we can to avoid or ignore, but the feast we celebrate this morning, the Feast of All Saints, forces us, for just a moment, to confront the thought of death as we remember and celebrate all the saints who, through physical death, have left this world for the next.

This is a time to celebrate the saints in heaven, the countless men and women who have inherited eternal paradise, those who can say with St. Paul, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*" (2 Timothy 4:7), and today we bring to mind not only those saints with names

we all know, like saints Peter and Paul, or Andrew and Mary. Today we also remember our loved ones, parents, grandparents, family, and friends, those beloved saints who have been instrumental in setting our feet on this path that leads to the kingdom of God. As you know, we pray for them every time we celebrate Holy Communion, but today especially, we pray, God that You would “grant them continual growth in thy love and service, and give us grace so to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of thy heavenly kingdom.”

In the liturgy for Holy Communion, we not only pray for the saints we love who have “departed this life in thy faith and fear,” we pray with them. We pray “with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name...” As you can see the liturgy for Holy Communion is filled with examples that point to our belief in what we call the Communion of Saints. The belief that every Christian, throughout all time, here or in heaven, is united to Christ, and to one another through Christ, in His Church.

There’s a passage in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews that reveals the intimacy, and the reality, of the communion that we saints on earth share with the saints in heaven. That passage begins with these words, “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*” (Hebrews 12:1). A great cloud of witnesses, the company of heaven, the people of God who have gone before us, currently surround us. They’re cheering us on, encouraging us to run this Christian race with the same kind of holy, righteous endurance that they did, and the fact that we can’t currently see them makes their loving presence no less real. We might compare this great, unseen cloud of witnesses to the innumerable amount of stars that fill the sky every night. Just because we can’t see the stars now doesn’t mean they’re gone. They are still there, only temporarily are they hidden from our view. We all know with complete certainty that when the sun sets we will see the stars again, and we know with an even greater certainty, that when the sun sets on our life on this earth, we will see those we love again.

“*Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*” Two weeks ago I was reminded of these words as I stood among what you might call “a great

cloud of witnesses” at the finish line of the Rogue Marathon. Angie ran that day, and she ran with endurance the race set before her. No analogy is perfect, but the events of that morning seem to parallel “*the race that is set before us,*” Consider the runner at the starting line that day, the course set before them, the finish line in mind. Doesn’t this sound like the Christian life? In the New Testament, the life of a saint striving for heaven is often likened to a race. Paul tells Christians not to run this race “*in vain nor toil in vain*” (Philippians 2:16), to “*press on toward the goal...*” (Philippians 3:14), to “*run in such a way that you may win*” (1 Corinthians 9:24), By the grace of God we’ve been given a race to run, a particular course to follow, the kingdom of God as our goal, and *so great a cloud of witnesses*, the Communion of Saints to cheer us on.

Many parallels can be drawn between a marathon and the Christian life, but this morning I’d ask you to consider just two that relate to our celebration of All Saints. First, we don’t run alone. Angie ran that day not only with people who had trained for this race with her, or other runners on the course, she also ran with the encouragement and support of her family and friends. On that weekend, her parents and brothers traveled to Medford to offer their support, her family here was at the race to encourage her, Alex made signs to hold up at different places along the way, the night before the race Hope came over to braid her hair, and the list goes on and on. Angie may not have been able to see all the people cheering her on at every point in the race, but she knew that we were there, and today we acknowledge not only what we can see, our brothers and sisters in Christ who run with us here on this earth. This morning we acknowledge and remember and celebrate all that we can’t see, our family and friends who have gone before us, the saints in heaven who love us, who set us on this course that leads to the kingdom of God, whose desire for us is that we might join them at the finish line.

The second point I would ask you to consider is the truth that the Communion of Saints helps us recognize our calling as the people of God. The family and friends who came to encourage and support Angie on race day hopefully helped her to further recognize something she already knew, that she was called to run the race well and finish strong. Every effort her loved ones made in some way directed her to press on toward that goal, and the thought that our loved ones, with all the saints in heaven, make up this “*great cloud of witnesses*” that surrounds us and cheers us on should help us

recognize something we already know: God has called us to run this race well, and by His grace, finish strong.

Two weeks ago I stood among what you might call “a great cloud of witnesses” at the finish line of the Rogue Marathon, and as I stood there with family and friends and watched all different kinds of people finish that race, I thought this must in some way be an image of what’s happening right now at heaven’s gate. May God give us grace to run this race well and press on, to the end that we may see our loved ones who are waiting for us there, and live with them in the presence of God forever.