

“Who’s Your Saint?”
+ All Saints Year A +
Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12
November 2, 2014

St. Mary and All Saints Catholic Church in Rome is one of the most magnificent buildings ever constructed. The last time I saw it was at night after a couple of hours of searching for an 18 year old who didn’t hear the instruction to meet back at the Trevi Fountain in 45 minutes to walk together to our next destination. Instead, he went there on his own to a fine Gelatto shop near this church of St. Mary and All Saints that you’ve probably only ever heard of as The Pantheon. The Pantheon predates Christianity - a marvel of architecture commissioned by Marcus Agrippa during the reign of Caesar Augustus in 26 BCE then rebuilt by the Emperor Hadrian in 126 AD. This coffered concrete dome with natural light pouring in from an “oculus” or open eye at the top was dedicated to all the gods and is the basis for all the domes you’ve ever seen in any capitol rotunda or basilica. Sadly, it most certainly would have been torn down as most of the other Roman buildings were during the medieval period except that Pope Boniface IV asked the Byzantine emperor Phocas (which has nothing to do with the oculus previously mentioned) for the building stating, “after the pagan filth is removed a church should be made of the place to the Holy Virgin Mary and all the martyrs, so that the commemoration of the saints would take place henceforth where not God but demons were formerly worshipped.”

The dedication of the church started a custom in the year 610 that is still observed by all of the Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Lutherans – yes, even we Lutherans who make certain everyone knows we don’t pray to saints – this is our day to honor the saints who have gone on before us, to consider the impact of their witness of faith and, inspired by their witness, to carry out our own life as saints who make a difference here in time and for eternity sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

That’s the short version of how All Saints got to be a festival celebrated by most of Christianity both in the East and the West, beginning as it did with the consecration of that cathedral and continues to this day. Here at Jehovah we light candles – a reminder of the light of faith that God gives to us in baptism just as little George will receive a baptismal candle in just a few moments.

All Saints Day is a great day of inspirational music and worship and yet, there is something about the tremendous hymns that we sing and the soaring Scripture passages we read, that leaves us common, ordinary people a little lost in that numberless galaxy of superstar saints; saints like Peter and Paul, and the martyrs who were killed in the Coliseum and elsewhere because they stubbornly resisted the imperial demand that Caesar was Lord, and as they gave up their lives, on their lips was the simple confession that Jesus is Lord.

Every year on All Saints we read the Gospel Beatitudes and we hope we are among those blessed because we are poor in spirit, or mourning or meek or merciful or pure in heart or peacemakers—not quite so enthusiastic about being persecuted for righteousness' sake, though that isn't really a day-to-day problem in our society. For us, in this time, the struggle to give a faithful witness as a disciple of Jesus is more about our actions and words than facing lions, being burned alive or crucified. That is not the case in other parts of the world: Syria, the Congo, Iraq, China – many other nations. If you are not already doing so pray for those saints who are alive and suffering for their faith in Jesus as Savior even as we gather here together in safety.

Yes, All Saints Day is about all the saints now alive and at work in God's Kingdom – and those we heard about in the book of Revelation where we are told that somewhere in that great multitude of palm-waving singing saints are people we already know; people we called husband or wife, father or mother, brother or sister, family, dear colleague or fast friend. That's the part of All Saints that reveals the sting of death – the pain of separation. On this day it is only right that we look back on the Saints we've known and loved.

Who is your saint this year – maybe every All Saints Day? For Susan Larsen, who cared so fully and faithfully for both of her parents, George and Charlotte, this has been a most difficult year as both of them died and I know they are in her thoughts and heart every day. George, a man who could build or fix almost anything – when his grand-daughter, Brianna, was at Central Lutheran School he helped Bruce Wegner on almost a daily basis. George was a veteran – dashing handsome – so cute that Charlotte, just a teenager, purposely bumped into his car so he would stop and meet her. Charlotte, the unstoppable, beat cancer for a decade longer than they'd told her, was just a car hop on roller skates in Napa Valley back then. They

came to Minnesota to be with Susan and Brianna. Susan went to see her Dad every day at the VA Alzheimer's unit. He always knew her and knew his pastor.

I know that Florence Heinicke and her sons are all missing saint Ted. His long illness was devastating – more so, perhaps, because he'd lived his life with joy and kind determination– joy in serving the church as a teacher, principal and professor of Education – and here at Jehovah as an elder. I wonder which one had more chuckles at Elders meetings, Aleta, do you think it was Eddie or Ted? Ed's sudden death after such a brief illness is still difficult to comprehend. Like Ted he was a man of strong faith in Jesus – a loving father, an exceptional educator, and provider of tomato plants to family and friends.

Evelyn Hoppert was an indomitable 95 year old who hadn't been able to attend Jehovah in person for 20 years. She lived in her home with support and aid from her family and aids despite severe health limitations. The last years in the nursing home she adjusted beyond what was expected – loved to go play Bingo with her 104 year old friend. She enjoyed the tapes from worship delivered by Dick and Karon Newman and Ed Schuster before them. She always had her Devotion Book next to her – and a dish of chocolate candy that I enjoyed!

98 year old Bea Minogue was feisty and faithful to her Lord and to her church, Jehovah. Married on the sly to the cute Irish cop down the street she made their Catholic/Lutheran marriage work when that was unthinkable. She'd come each Sunday to early service at Jehovah and then go to Mass with her children at St. Columba. She had to memorize all their prayers and do all their confirmation work with them – every day, every week.

When I looked at the birthday cards from various members I noticed that Millie had signed Mel's name in parenthesis though he died a month earlier. He prayed for Jehovah and the ministry we share here every night. His daughter told me how she'd hear him name everyone in his prayers: his children & grandchildren, his son-in-law the pastor, grandson the missionary, adopted daughter in her ministry and his pastor. I was really hoping Mel would beat his uncle who died at 101 three years ago. It's good to have goals at every stage in life! It is good to remain in Bible Study and prayer. Mel could no longer read and it was very difficult for him to hear but he listened closely to God's Word to the very end.

Well, those are the new heavenly saints of Jehovah from the past year. Yes, there were more names – saints held close to the hearts of people in this place who know their stories and miss them dearly. – For a brief span of time in this sea of time going on into eternity we journeyed together – all of us people found by God with the gift of faith and washed clean of all sin in the waters of baptism. Little George is joining that journey with us, shortly. Walking alongside him to encourage him in faith will be his parents and godparents – and all of us who pledge to see that he is raised in the faith that God will give him as a gift. Oh what wonders will George see as God’s little boy, child and man on this journey of faith before him? For him, as for us, it is a journey with a destination, where we at last will join all the saints who from their labors rest, at the throne, and the home of God. Amen.

Now may our gracious God who has knit us together into one communion as the body of Christ, grant us grace to follow the saints who have gone before us, the grace to love the saints still with us, and the grace to look ahead to the joys He has prepared for all who love Him.