

Sermon for All Saints' Day
The Reverend Philene M Ware Dunn

May God's Peace be with you and yours.

Let us pray:

Almighty God – We are grateful to celebrate the memory of the lives of many, many people whom we have known and even not known – yet – whom have had influences upon us and your church such that we have the freedom today to gather together to worship you and give you thanks and praises for the gift of hope in your teachings, grace, and love. Amen.

Welcome everyone – everyone here and everyone joining us over the internet.
I am so happy we are here together.

Today is a special day for St Timothy's. At 4pm this afternoon, you will be celebrating the institution of Father Charles ministry as the 20th Rector of this congregation. I am very happy for you and congratulations! Charles was the year ahead of me in seminary and I know you are getting a fine and good man as your rector.

And today is also special because we are celebrating one of the 7 Principal Feasts of the Episcopal Church year - All Saints' Day.

Can you name the other 6?

Christmas Day – or the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ – Jesus' birth, God among us.

the Epiphany – which we Episcopalian's use to celebrate the arrival of the Magi, the gentile magi, who witness the revelation of Jesus' divinity to all people. Other traditions use this day to acknowledge the grouping of Jesus' divine revelations – his many epiphanies – such as: his birth, the coming of the Magi, his baptism, and his first miracle – changing the water to wine at the wedding in Cana – All manifestations of his divinity.

Then after some time we celebrate Easter Day – Christ's resurrection – His victory over Death.

Ascension Day – Christ's 40-day conclusion of his post resurrection appearances and his final elevation – his lifting up - of his earthly nature to divine glory and near presence of God.

Then 10 more days later or 50 days after Easter - the Day of Pentecost – the arrival of the gift of the Holy Spirit, fulfilling Jesus’ promise of an advocate.

And then the following Sunday - Trinity Sunday – Celebrating the “one and equal glory of Father, Son, Holy Spirit – in Trinity of Persons and in Unity of Being.”

As you can see, these seven Principal Feast days in our Church year represent a life cycle, if I might call it so - a life cycle of Christ: Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, and nearing the end - the conclusion - of our Church year we have today’s celebration – All Saints’ Day – our final and 7th Principal Feast.

Now, this day has gone through many changes over the centuries reflecting how our understanding of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit work in our lives. You see, sometimes we do not get things right the first time – and maybe not even the second time – nor even third.

We humans do have a tendency to get off track because we get all wrapped up – and even confused – in our own understandings of things – how we think things are to be.

For instance – I don’t know about you but when I used to hear the word “saint” – I learned from movies and TV shows – the social media of my childhood – “saint” meant it was someone whose life is an exemplary model of Christian practice, virtue, sacrifice, faith, and even performance of miracles. They were the superheroes, and they were canonized into an elite class by the papal church authority. These models are Saints with a capital “S”.

But, the Episcopal Church does not canonize people to sainthood – capital “S” - we do, however, honor men and women who did have heroic commitments to Christ – even to the cost of their lives. And we commemorate them in our Book of Common prayer [BCP, 19-30] and another record book called “Lesser Feasts and Fasts” – which is an addendum to our Book of Common Prayer – and these people each have their own calendar days.

And here are two editions of “Lesser Feasts and Fasts” – one from 1964 and the other from 2022 coming out of that summer’s National Convention – thus, the most recent edition. As you can see by the difference in their sizes that saints are still very active in today’s world.

And let me also clarify – just as names can be added to this book - names can be removed, too. And one such name is under discernment in our most recent edition.

So - originally – all saints – were commemorated on one Feast Day – All Saints’ Day.

And with the list getting somewhat long, it was decided back in the 9th century to set November 1st aside to celebrate only the “elite” of the saints – the “Saints” with a capital “S”.

But then it was realized relatively quickly that the mistake of “forgetting” all the other saints – little “s” – was not helping the church any. So, a commemoration of the “forgotten” saints was brought back in the 10th century – to be celebrated on November 2nd – “All Souls’ Day.”

But wait - that is not the end of the story.

There was yet again another change only 500 years ago in the 16th century – during the Reformation. The commemoration of “All Souls” was seen as a church abuse, so it was abolished. The “little saints” were again pushed aside.

Well, somebody must have read Paul’s letters more carefully again and realized that something was not right. Remember, it is Paul – St Paul – capital “S” - who calls all followers of Christ – “saints.”

And “All Souls’ Day” was re-introduced in our Book of Common Prayer in 1979 after an almost 500-year absence. And it is officially called “Commemoration of All Faithful Departed” [BCP pg 29].

We American Episcopalians call it “Commemoration of All Faithful Departed” but in other cultures – like where I grew up on the Texas-Mexico border – it is also known as – All Souls’ Day. After all, it is right to at least once a year to remember our family, friends, and loved ones who have preceded us – Christian or otherwise. And there are traditions to go to the loved ones’ gravesites, tidy them up, have a picnic with the loved ones’ favorite foods and drink, and remembering and sharing the family stories.

And we, here at Saint Timothy’s, will be doing that next Saturday, at our 7pm Saturday service – a bilingual service – where all are invited – that means you, too, - where we will

all be celebrating and remembering the lives of all those who came before us. We will be celebrating all they have done for us and encouraged us to continue in their holy work. We will have pictures and favorite items and stories – lots of stories – to share at the potluck afterwards.

But – that is still not all.

There is a movement to return to commemorating all saints’ – both capital S and little s – on All Saints’ Day – the first Sunday of November – sort of like we are doing here today. It is a return to the practice of the early church and, I think Saint Paul would approve of it, because we have learned and understand that his letters still apply to us today, and we, too, are his beloved saints as well as “children of God.”

Will this happen in our lifetimes? - I don’t know. Another 500 years?

So, take this time today, to remember – to remember all those who have gone before us, guiding us to follow God’s path. Take the time to remember what they did or maybe didn’t know how to do - to bring us to follow God’s path. And take the time to realize that they are now in God’s heavenly realm – in God’s peace and God’s joy – because God has not forgotten them – any of them.

Take this time – now – to realize that God has not forgotten them - nor us.

And so, take the time today to hear all of them – as John tells us in our Revelation reading – proclaiming - with us in our worship today - God’s glory - joining our voices – and this is my favorite part in celebrating the Eucharist with you – joining our voices with the Angels and Archangels and ALL the company of heaven – ALL – that: Holy, Holy, Holy, is our Lord – Hosanna in the highest.

And come to this table to dine- to picnic - with the blessed sacrament of bread and wine – and the sharing of stories - joining in that wonderful mystery of our faith that:

Even though our Christ has died --- our Christ is risen - And -- our Christ will come again.

Come, my friends; come and let us celebrate together this wonderous and mysterious – mysterious - unity of earth and heaven – the seen and unseen - the past, the present, and

the future, - come and celebrate – ALL of us – together – in the cloud of witnesses - with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – our one living God.

Come.

Amen.

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Supply Priest
The Diocese of Virginia

Year A All Saints' Day 20231105
Supplying at St Timothy's – Herndon, Virginia
Sunday, 8am, preaching
Sunday, 10am, preaching and presiding.
Services – in-person, 10am - Hybrid
Communion – Clergy intinction

Readings –

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12