

**Sermon for November 6, 2016 (All Saints' Day, Year C)**  
**Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: Ephesians 1:11-23; Psalm 149; Luke 6:20-31

Title: Bless Those Who Curse You

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints”  
(Ephesians 1:15).

We get rather confused in our English language when it comes to “saints.”  
For some reason, the single Greek word “hagios” has become TWO words in English.  
It can be translated as “holy” or as “saint”.  
And in our English language, these two things – holy and saint – are related but they  
are not the same, are they?

We are gathered here for a celebration of the Holy Eucharist, but we wouldn't say  
“Saint Eucharist”, would we?

A saint typically means a recognized godly person, while holy describes objects that  
are venerated.

But the original Greek word carried the same meaning for both people AND objects.

To be holy is to be uncommon. To be holy is to be different from ordinary, to be set  
apart for divine purposes.

To be holy people means to be a group with a special purpose and destiny, one that  
sets us apart from the rest of ordinary human society.

Today, we celebrate All Saints' Day. It is a day when we pause to praise God for the  
lives of those holy ones who have inspired us, and to consider what it means for us  
to live all of our lives surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses who make up the  
Body of Christ, both the living and the dead.

All of the various traditions of remembering and celebrating the lives of the saints  
can *perhaps* be traced back to the death of Polycarp in the year of our Lord 156.  
That's pretty early on. Smyrna was one of the major cities of Asia Minor, located in  
fact just 30 miles north of Ephesus.

Polycarp became a disciple of Christ around the year 70. Eventually, he became the bishop of Smyrna, the chief pastor and overseer of the churches in that region. He served in this position for about 40 years when a wave of anti-Christian sentiment swept through the area around Smyrna.

Since he was the Christians' spiritual leader, Polycarp was arrested and taken before the governor in front of a large crowd in the great amphitheater located high on a hill overlooking the harbor.

The proconsul (the governor) saw no purpose in hurting this old man, whom everyone in the city knew, so he offered Polycarp a way out: "Take the oath [to Caesar]", he said, "and I will let you go. Curse your Christ!"

Now listen to Polycarp's answer: "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

"Swear by the spirit of Caesar!" the governor demanded, clearly becoming annoyed by this man's obstinance.

But Polycarp replied calmly and with an astounding sense of dignity, "If you really are so foolish as to think that I would do such a thing, and if you pretend that you do not know who I am, then hear this plainly: I am a Christian."

So his fate was sealed, and Polycarp was burned at the stake. The whole episode was recorded by a member of the church in Smyrna, and this is what was written at the conclusion of the story. Listen to this, please!

"When it was all over, we gathered up Polycarp's bones, more precious to us than jewels, finer than pure gold, and we laid them to rest in a place we had already set aside. There, the Lord permitting, we shall gather and celebrate with great gladness and joy the day of his martyrdom as [if it were] a birthday. It will serve as a commemoration of all who have gone before us, and [as] training and [preparation for] those of us for whom a crown may [yet] be in store."

(From Celebrating the Saints: Devotional Readings for Saints' Days, Morehouse Publishing, 2001: pp. 72-73.)

My friends: do you see what happened? The church loved this man, this wise and gentle and patient shepherd who had loved and followed and served Christ for 86 years!

When Polycarp was so violently taken away from them, they didn't know what to do!

There was no blueprint of established practice for what to do in this situation. There were no handbooks, no internet to search for advice.

So they did what seemed best. They lovingly buried the bones of their dear friend, and they agreed that they would gather at his grave every year on the anniversary of his death to break bread together, just as they used to do with Polycarp when he was alive.

And they did all of this simply because they loved him! And they wanted to honor him. That's all.

And out of that simple and primal need to love and honor a dear friend, there developed in the church a practice of collecting the bones of the martyrs – known as their relics – and gathering at their graves to celebrate the Eucharist and remembering the days on which they died.

Over the centuries and on into the Middle Ages, all of this became a vastly complicated and complex web of commemorations and duties and obligations.

BUT, it didn't start that way!

Is it too simple just to love and honor all of those good people, those God-loving people, who have gone before us and have shown us how to live in the way of Christ?

Is it too simple just to love and honor one another as good people who are sincerely trying to love God and to love our neighbors, even though we really don't know what we're doing or how to do it? But we are trying!

I know that about you, each of you. And I want to celebrate that. We NEED to celebrate it on this day.

Sometimes the simplest things are the very best things of all.

So I want you to turn to those sitting close to you, on each side, whether you know their name or not, and look them straight in the eye, and – with conviction and faith – say to each one, “YOU are a saint of God!”  
Please, do that now.

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It is true. Each one of us has been designated as holy and set apart for a special purpose, not because of who WE are, but simply because of God’s own choice.

And this means that we have a job to do!

Now, unless you happen to be living alone in a cave somewhere, I guarantee you that you are going to see and hear a LOT of unhappy people this week – no matter who happens to win the right to move into the White House on Tuesday!  
And regardless of the outcome of all of the other elections and ballot measures.

And you will hear many voices predicting the end of the world, or at least something close to it!

But don’t you wonder how those early Christians in Smyrna were feeling about their government when their authorities had the old bishop Polycarp burned at the stake, and when government-sponsored persecution sent many of them to an early death?

Did they stage a revolution? Did they take up arms and march against the capital?  
Did they work on devising a strategy to take over the legislature?

No. They did what the saints of God have always done!

They gathered together to give glory to God, to break bread together, to pray together, to love one another, and to meditate together on the words of their Savior and Master who said such crazy things as, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28).

It may sound crazy to you, but I believe that we have been set apart by God for a special purpose. And it means that when everyone around us in ordinary society is pulling out their hair because of this or that or whatever, you and I find the grace to remain strong and grounded and centered in a different reality. In God’s reality.

The world needs us to show what is possible when life is lived by a different reality, one that is far beyond polls and laws and money and war and the desire for power.

I believe with all my heart that the church is the hope of the world, and there is nothing more powerful or more beautiful than people who are trying to live out these crazy things that Jesus teaches us in the Gospels.

Especially this week, will you live each day simply as a saint of God? As a holy one set apart for a special purpose? As one who is in this world, but not of it?

Will you live as one with a different foundation, a different source of strength, a different motivation, and a different destiny?

May it be so, because this is what humanity needs from us more than anything else.  
Amen.