

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Our Commitment to the Body of Christ"
Dr. J. Dent

November 2, 2008
All Saints Sunday

Every time I step up to the front here I am humbled by the fact that many are doing so across the face of the earth, throughout every time zone and every continent. I try to allow the Lord to activate my imagination in realizing that hundreds of thousands of other churches are operating across this land and across North America. There are 900 or so in our little denomination across Canada, 150 or so across the Atlantic provinces. I may have been in a couple of dozen of these across the six provinces in which we've lived, and also have been to quite a few in the United States.

I stand here and try to imagine what God sees and hears Sunday by Sunday. We know from census material that about 80% of the 300 million plus Americans self-identify as Christians, and about 77% of the 30 million plus Canadians self-identify as Christians. We also know that only about 20% of these in Canada say they go to church weekly. But nevertheless, I try to see in my mind these millions of believers, as I have travelled through much of North America. Then I think of the millions in house church and government churches in China, tens of millions, and then across Asia, Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, India, Pakistan, through the Middle East where there are many more Christians than we think when we listen to the media, and then through Europe which is declining in Christian numbers, but still in the millions, and then the hundreds of millions in Africa, in thousands of languages across the globe today, praise is rising to Almighty God. Also throughout Australia and in small groups in Antarctica, worship and praise to God is going up.

I say this in part because we feel so small and so isolated at times. But God knows where we are and who we are. I say it because this is All Saints. There is much confusion around the term "saint." In the first millennium or so of Christian history, there developed a veneration of believers who were leading exemplary lives. This veneration even began to look like a relationship between the living and dead with a prayer to those who had died and were closer to God, to intercede on their behalf. Such a veneration was happening with Mary, the mother of Jesus. But the church has always sought to save true worship for only God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And the Reformation certainly made this clear, looking again to the Apostle

Paul who used the term saints (*hagioi*) in his letters to refer to all those who had been called by God (Romans 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), the elect (Romans 8:33; Col. 3:12), and faithful (Col. 1:2).

The word "saint" in Greek is connected to verbs with the same root which we translate, "sanctified," "set apart," "made holy." When we trust Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we are given a gift, the holiness that he lived and was. Now we know that we are not perfect in this life, but nevertheless we are, all of us who have given our lives to Christ, we are saints, set apart to God, made holy by Jesus, and becoming more and more sanctified as we grow in our relationship with Jesus. We are consecrated to God's ways as we trust God day by day.

So let's not confuse the notion that some hold that only a few are saints, and only the best of the believers. Every one of us is a saint, who knows Jesus as Saviour and Lord. We are priests, every one of us to God, set apart to spread the Good News that this relationship with God is available to everyone. Our true reason for being, our ultimate identity is found in God, and he sets us aside to Himself and makes us more and more like Jesus, as we pursue this relationship, as we receive the grace to be who he has made us to be.

We meet here in this place we call a sanctuary (*ta hagia*), or "the place set aside to God," or "the saints' place." We say this even though we know we are sinners. We know we have much to learn and much more relationship with God to grow into...yet we have this identity, this title, this relationship as a gift from God.

So how might we use this gift?

First of all, we need to remember the larger body of Christ across the world. I've tried to help you at the beginning of this sermon begin to "see" across the face of the planet at all the worshippers who we join with Sunday by Sunday. Also as we consider the whole planet we are reminded of our part in the Great Commission to draw everyone to Jesus Christ and his Gospel. We have the AMS which reminds us of our mission. We have the Scriptures that remind us of our mission here to draw others to the One to whom we have been drawn.

Second we need to remember the larger body of Christ here in this city. Everyone here knows that we are not the only Christian gathering in St.

John's. You only need to spend a few minutes in the Yellow Pages to find out that there are fifty to sixty other congregations out there in the greater St. John's area. Yes, they are Roman Catholic and Anglican and United and Salvation Army and Pentecostal and Baptist and non-denominational and others that I can't remember right at this moment. We together represent the body of Christ here in this city. I am trusting the Lord and giving time out of my schedule for more opportunities together: to pray together, to worship together, to do outreach together, to show that we practically love God, love this city and one another to the best of our ability. God does amazing things when we choose to trust each other across traditional denominational boundaries.

Third, we need to remember the larger body of Christ right here in this congregation. We say "All Saints" and try to teach about how much we celebrate what we have together in Christ, but look around. Go ahead, look around. Now you have a snapshot of what a little part of the body of Christ looks like, a little piece of the Christian movement across the face of the earth. Here is a piece of the practical picture of what John records in the book of Revelation 7:

7:9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

7:10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

The Lamb is Jesus who gave his life for us. The same one who puts it so succinctly when he taught on the little hill, what we call the Sermon on the Mount. He tells us that we will receive the supernatural encouragement and peace that we need as we develop in the following ways:

As we recognize how little our resources are, and how great God's are;
As we experience loss; and turn to God for comfort;
As we choose to be disciplined; and love what God loves;
As we long for what is right and just;
As we care for those who need help;
As we agree with God and choose God's ways;
As we seek to bring life and peace in violent and dark times;
As we don't count the cost to ourselves;
nor become too discouraged with the criticism that comes our way;

God pours his life into us and we do indeed receive the supernatural encouragement and well-being that we need so desperately.

That's my version of the beatitudes, those nine blessings that Jesus speaks in Matthew 5. Listen to what Eugene Peterson says in the Message. [read here]

These are ways of being not only out in the community, but in the church as well. We need to agree to bless our fellow brothers and sisters across the city and around the world. We need to agree to not wish them harm, but to build them up. No one gains from putting these other Christian communities down. Instead, as God gives us grace, we should pray for one another, and make time for one another. Yes, I know it's one more thing to do in a life that is already so full. But if we have so little time for our congregation, let alone for the larger body of Christ, what does that say about our priorities?

On this All Saints Sunday, we remember with thanks the wider Christian family to which we belong and simply say with our words and our actions: Thank you, Lord.

Let us pray.