
The Characteristics of the Saints in our Lives

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
All Saints' Day – Year B

All Saints' has always been a special day for me. It is the anniversary of my baptism. It is the name of the chapel where I graduated from college and was eventually married. It is also the anniversary of my son Bradford's baptism, here at the Cathedral in 2013. And in just a few hours, I will baptize our second son, Cyrus, on this holy feast day.

I love All Saints' Day. I love the festivity. I love the anthems and hymns. And I love today's gospel text, because it affirms everything I know to be true about the saints in my life.

Today's gospel affirms two things about the saints in our lives:

1. Saints are the people who stand beside you in the difficult moments of life, perhaps even when you stink. (See Mary and Martha.)
2. Saints have the ability to hear Jesus' voice at all times, even when life has you in a bind and as good as dead. (See Lazarus.)

Back to my first point, saints are those standing beside you in the difficult moments of life, even when you stink. As a parent of a toddler and infant, I believe that anyone who has changed a stinky diaper deserves to be called a saint!

In all seriousness, there are people like Mary and Martha in our lives, people who walk us through the difficult moments. These are the saints who are there regardless of the situation or circumstances.

These saints stand beside us, even when we act like Lazarus smells. Yes, as sinful humans, we all have the ability to act like Lazarus smells. Yet, these saints believe in us when we are at our worst. The very presence and deep faith of these saints can change the course of our lives.

If you take anything away from rambling monologue this morning, realize the person sitting next to you or a colleague or friend might be the greatest saint in your life. Even though you know their imperfections, and are often the person pointing them out, today I want you to recognize these people as saints, because they are agents of "faith, hope, and love" in your life.

Eight years ago, I met John Stott, a great saint of the Church. Stott was a famous Anglican author and priest whose books, lectures, and preaching shaped the Evangelical Movement in Great Britain, causing many to view him as the Billy Graham of the Church of England.

My seminary class was studying in Canterbury and one of my former classmates was living in London and working for John Stott.

My classmate invited some of us to London to have tea with this great theologian. (So, when we sing that famous hymn in a

few minutes, believe it when it says you can meet saints over tea.)

John Stott was the retired rector of All Souls' Parish in London, and was living in the parish's apartment, because he had donated his book royalties to fund theological libraries in Africa.

There we were, sitting in front of one of the most influential Christians in the twentieth century. We were star struck, like teenagers in a room with Taylor Swift.

When we came to our senses, we began to talk about life and theology. At that time, Stott was in his mid eighties and his health was deteriorating. As Stott talked, he would get frustrated at his inability to recall information regarding the topic being discussed.

It was difficult watching this great theologian struggle. But in the midst of his frustration, a quiet voice would start speaking in the background. It was Frances Whitehead. Time and time again, Frances would finish John Stott's sentences, and gently direct him to a biblical quote or book that Stott was struggling to recall.

Frances Whitehead had been John Stott's secretary for over 50 years. Neither of them had married, and during those days, she was functioning as his caretaker. Frances had typed every word that John Stott had written...over 50 books, hundreds of lectures, and possibly thousands of sermons.

During that afternoon tea, it became clear that each saw the other as a saint.

Today's gospel reminds us that the saints are those people in our lives who are present through it all, people we couldn't live without.

John Stott once said that he prayed to die before Frances, because he couldn't imagine life without her. In 2011, his prayer was granted.

I remember the last question we asked John Stott that afternoon at tea. We asked him to tell us how he went about living a Christian life. He smiled and said, "Listen to the voice of Christ."

And that brings me to my final point: saints have the ability to hear Jesus' voice at all times, even when life has them bound up and as good as dead.

Saints realize that the only voice that really matters is the voice of Christ. They have learned to ignore the distractions and voices of this world in order to hear a voice so powerful it speaks life into death.

As Christians, we are called to listen to the voice of Christ. We are called to believe that God speaks into our lives and can be heard even at the darkest moments.

Let me conclude by calling our attention to something we are about to do in a few minutes. During the Offertory, we will process our pledge cards to this altar, as we celebrate the Cathedral as Koinonia—Holy Community.

I have heard countless stories from parishioners about how others in this parish stood beside you through difficult situations.

These saints stood by your side when life was difficult, messy, and maybe even stinky. Today, we celebrate and support this parish, because Koinonia has a way of bringing saints into our lives.

Finally, Koinonia creates a community grounded in worship, scripture, hymns, and holy relationship. It is where the saints of the past have gone to hear with clarity the voice of Christ...and it is where we come today to hear a voice that resonates so deep into our souls that we can stand at the foot of the grave with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus...and with full confidence sing a glorious Alleluia.