

All Saints' Day
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I experienced a professional first this week. I ended up needing to write two sermons for the same set of readings. We're celebrating All Saints' Day this morning at lively St. Mark's—complete with a baptism, and a trumpet, and an optimistic future. But I also had the sad honor of celebrating All Saints' Day this past Wednesday at the final Eucharist of St. James' Church downtown, where that parish had served its community for 150 years before closing its doors.

The week gave me a bit of emotional whiplash—trying to think through the Sermon on the Mount in these two very different contexts. At one service, we were thanking God for 150 years of service and remembering the rich history of all the saints who had passed before, while also grieving the sadness of the church closing. In this morning's service, we're thanking God for our vibrant parish and for the gift of baptism for little Billie. We're welcoming Billie into the Body of Christ and remembering our own baptism. I find myself so thankful for this morning and also sad for that church down the street. Aren't they saints too?

The dissonance of these two services reminded me of a vital lesson that, like most lessons worth learning, needs to be learned over and over. I was reminded that, as lovely as it is, our membership isn't really to a parish. I know that we love our buildings, our organs, our red doors, and our traditions. I know that we closely associate the building and the name with our identity as Christians. And of course, there is overlap. The parish is where we best live out our Christian responsibility and the place where we most visibly experience the overwhelming grace of God. But we're not baptizing little Billie into St. Mark's. We belong, and Billie will belong, to the Body of Christ, to the communion of saints—which is a different thing altogether.

Churches can be wonderful, don't get me wrong. But did you know that sometimes church people can be a little mean? Or short-tempered? Or short-sighted? Did you know that priests can be bombastic? Egotistical? Wrong-headed? I know this all comes as a shock, but sometimes, churches can even forget what it means to live out the gospel in the world. We can forget the poor. We can forget to love one another as Christ loved us first.

Or, as one famous advice columnist wrote, “churches are hospitals for sinners, not museums for saints.”

The Body of Christ is that ineffable, immortal, transcendent reality that we yearn for. It's what we glimpse at the altar and at the font. It's the membership we remind people about when they die. It's the cloud of witnesses we pray for each week. The church, on the other hand, is what we have to work with here and now in the world as it is. Churches open; churches close. Churches worry about budgets and roofs and stewardship campaigns. Churches rise and fall with demographic shifts. The Body of Christ is different. The Body of Christ is the only eternal. That communion of saints is who we honor today—past, present, and, with Billie, future.

God's great trick is this: when God looks down on us sitting in church—warts and all—God chooses us to be saints. God chooses to love us, even when we can be real pills.

Little Billie will likely belong to many churches in her life—or maybe even go through some times where she doesn't belong to any. But her membership, and your membership, in the Body of Christ is inviolate. When you are sealed with the cross of Christ in baptism, there is literally nothing that can then separate you from the love of God.

Remember, saints of God, that your membership is with all the baptized across time and space. We're just here at St. Mark's for a moment. And, really, in the grand scheme of things, St. Mark's is just here on earth for a moment. But we belong to the Body of Christ, with Billie, and all the loved ones you remember today, forever. Amen.