

All Saints' Sunday, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
November 6, 2022

My best friend's husband died unexpectedly of a heart attack in her kitchen at the age of 47. He was survived by four children, friends, and a devastated wife. This happened several years ago, and she was reflecting to me the other day that, years later, she has had to learn how to talk about him in a realistic way, warts and all. See, he had made some pretty poor life choices—some his fault, some not. He was a messy man. He had a lot of love and a lot of damage. And sometimes the damage got the better of him and his family.

But his life was cut short, and in grieving, it has been tempting to make him into a superhero or even a saint. I've been known to do this too. I can lionize my dead dad sometimes—perhaps glossing over the parts of his life that weren't so great.

It's easy to make All Saints day a day about the big saints—the glorious dead who make the world better in huge ways. Who did miracles and who lit the world on fire? St. Mark. St. Bridgit. St. John. St. Joan of Arc.

I don't know about you, but I'm just not as interested in them as I am in my neighbor, in the person sitting next to me in the pew. I remember reading a sermon by C.S. Lewis when I was younger that I won't quote to you now, but basically, in it, he says that when you look at another human being, you are looking at both a monster and an immortal angel at the same time. I remember thinking that he was being awfully dramatic. But the older I get, and the more that I understand my own capacity for great compassion as well as great selfishness, the more I think he was on to something. The scandal of God is that the hugely flawed person with whom we interact every day is a saint. They are made holy, not because they are so very faithful—though they very well might be. They are saints because God has been and will always be faithful. God's glory gets reflected off the surface of all of us, and that makes us saints.

I know that this understanding of sainthood isn't quite as exciting as the superhero version. And I do not begrudge anyone their devotion to the big S saints. In fact, I still have a soft spot in my heart for St. Christopher even though he got defrocked in the 90s. There's nothing wrong with a little aspiration, judiciously applied.

But I find that my Christian faith is bolstered by people who are as much sinner as they are saint. Last week, we baptized two beautiful little girls. And, I hate to say it, but there is a non-zero chance that both of those little girls will do something cruel in their lives. They will be unkind, or

tell a lie, or perhaps even worse. And yet, at that baptismal font, we called them saints, knowing full well that their life would be a complicated one.

It's a little early to talk about Christmas, but it's never wrong to remember that the kind of God that we worship in the Christian faith is the kind who came to earth to sit in the messiness of this world. Jesus looked at his friends and knew that they were as much sinner as they were saint, and he loved them anyway. He looked at his friends and knew that they were as much sinner as they were saint, and he died for them anyway. I do not believe that Jesus just came for the superheroes. I think Jesus came for us.

So, if we are just as much sinners as we are saints, who do we even celebrate today? Why do we get out the white cloth and get out the trumpet and the candles? I think we do it because we have a deep spiritual intuition. I think we have a spiritual intuition that tells us one day we will be in the presence of the Almighty, robed in white and singing, and we will know love divorced from our human frailty. In a way, All Saints' Day—just like a baptism and just like the communion table—is a performance of a future hope. It is to name that the reign of God has started but has not been completed, nor will it be until we die. I think All Saints' Day is a reminder that there is a spark of the divine in each of us. Which then has implications for how we treat every other human that we meet. After all, if we, with all our foibles, are saints, then so much everyone else that we meet.

All Saints' day is a dream. A day to remember the dead who rest in the arms of God—even those who did not seem terribly saintly when we remember them. And it is a day to think about the ways in which we are loved, even when we do not seem terribly saintly. There is nothing in the human heart that God cannot redeem.

Even the most glorious saint carved in stone was sometimes cruel, sometimes neglectful. And even the most horrid person has been kind. And that, I am afraid to report, is the mess of All Saints' Day. And that is the messy life that God looks at and says is holy. So, today we will praise God and then break bread with one another because God has declared us—even when we are pretty sure we don't deserve it—saints. Amen.