

November 3, 2019
All Saint's Sunday, Year C
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Daniel 7:1-3,15-18
Psalm 149
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. I'm going to offer a few words about All Saints' Day, and then we're going to have an activity.

Has anyone heard of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco? It's an Episcopal Church like no other. It was founded in 1978 by two priests who wanted to create a church where they could implement the liturgical innovation of which they had been dreaming. I attended Sunday worship there only once, in 2003, shortly after I arrived in the Bay Area to attend seminary in Berkeley. Walk into the church, and you quickly realize that things are done differently there. For example, as first-timers, Jakki and I were quickly recruited to carry and twirl the parasols that accompany the procession of the Gospel book.

More fundamental is the unique church architecture. The sanctuary is set up with two sections. The liturgy of the word takes place in a rectangular area with chairs. The liturgy of the table takes place in a round area, empty except for the altar in the center, and with a rotunda above. They have communion in the round something like we do. But at the offertory, the entire congregation *dances* to the altar. The choreography is fairly simple, involving putting a hand on the shoulder of the person in front of you, taking steps forward and back.

Encircling the inside of the rotunda are larger-than-life-sized images of ninety saints, all frozen in the same dance: hand on the shoulder ahead and one knee raised. Among them are saints you would expect, such as the Apostle Paul, Mary Magdalene, and Francis of Assisi. Also among them are saints you would *not* expect, such as poet Emily Dickinson, conservationist John Muir, anthropologist Margaret Mead, choreographer Martha Graham, singer Ella Fitzgerald, and musician John Coltrane. I admit being a little skeptical over some of them. I wondered, for example, whether Gandhi, Malcolm X, and Anne Frank would *want* their images continually circling a Christian altar. And I was very skeptical about Lady Godiva, depicted naked, dancing next to her horse.

It helps to read what the founder has to say about the church's intentions with these dancing saints:

Our broad idea of sainthood comes from both the Bible and Gregory of Nyssa's writings. The Hebrew concept of holiness originally had no moral content, but simply meant having God's stamp on you; being marked and set apart as God's own.

As the Bible sees it, saints and sinners are the same people. We celebrate those whose lives show God at work, building a deep character to match the godlike image which stamps them as God's own from the start. Of course God works with more than Christians, and more than Christians are saints. Gregory held that every human can progress toward God – indeed, to stop our progress is already to move away. All humanity shares God's image, and shows it to the universe, so all people can move toward God together. That is what we are made for. Where God's image is obscured by sin, and nature's harmony is broken, Christ rediscovers Her image for us, and teaches us to mend conflict and restore harmony so that all can move toward God once again. Every aspect of human nature—our minds, our bodies, our virtues, our desires, our sexuality, even our mortality—God has made for this purpose. And so every human progressing toward goodness plays a part in the salvation of the world.¹

The St. Gregory's website includes the image and a short bio of each depicted saint. It says this about Lady Godiva: "Godiva's legend has her riding horseback naked through the streets of Coventry to protest the local lord's (her own husband's) new taxes that would strip the poor of everything, even the clothes off their back. Her protest says to us, 'You have done this and it is your shame; I am not ashamed myself, for this woman's body was created by God.'"

Today we recognize and celebrate the entire communion of saints—past, present, and future; likely or unlikely; perfect and not-so-much. We celebrate the saints who have been near to us—parents, grandparents, teachers, mentors—and saints whose influence worked through our minds and hearts.

To that end, we're going to do a short exercise. You'll see that there are slips of paper and markers in the pews. I'm going to ask you to get up and move around a little. As you move, think about people you understand as a saint. For at least one of them, and more if you want, draw something on a slip of paper that represents that person. After you've done that, pair off with someone who is not your spouse, and tell each other in a sentence or two who you chose and why. To demonstrate, I'm going to show you two that I did. [Describe.] You don't need to be a great artist! And you don't have to do it this way—you can be more creative than I am.

Notes

¹ Richard Fabian, "Who Are These Like Stars Appearing," St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, available at https://www.saintgregorys.org/uploads/2/4/2/6/24265184/who_are_these_like_stars_appearing.pdf (accessed November 3, 2019).