

When Christ Calls, Saints Answer

Imagine this. Exhausted from a long, debilitating illness, you have fallen deeply asleep. You lie alone in darkness and your spirit wanders aimlessly, immersed in even darker dreams. You vaguely remember that you once had reasons to wake up, things to do, people you loved, but you can't quite recall them. It's easier to sleep, dream, and put the sorrows and disappointments of the waking world behind you. And then, you hear a sort of scraping sound and the voice of someone you once loved like a brother calling your name. You dimly remember waiting, longing to hear that voice, losing hope day after day as your illness worsened and your friend failed to appear. If you really thought about it, you might even be angry, but getting all worked up feels like too much effort. You'd rather just go back to sleep, and you try. But that beloved, insistent voice keeps calling you. So, reluctantly perhaps, you turn away from your dreams, open your eyes and sit up, your muscles stiff and creaky from lack of use. You rise, take one shaky step, then another, and stumble out of the darkness until you're suddenly immersed in the brilliant sunlight of early afternoon, staring into the smiling, tear-stained face of your friend and God.

When recounting the resurrection of Lazarus, John clearly describes Jesus, the bewildered disciples, the grieving sisters, the visiting Temple priests, even the gossiping crowd. We are easily caught up in the drama, imagining the awestruck gasps as Jesus performs his most spectacular miracle. But John tells us nothing from the perspective of the resurrected Lazarus. That's a shame because Lazarus' experience exemplifies what it means to be a saint.

Each November, Episcopalians join with our fellow Anglicans and many other Christians to celebrate the Feast of All Saints, commemorating saints known and unknown. As the Episcopal Dictionary of the Church recognizes, the saints include all those who have been formally canonized or recognized by church authority. However, the Book of Acts refers to all

faithful Christians as saints, and Paul bestows that title on all the congregations that received his letters. If we understand saints as holy people who share in the life of Christ, it's a safe bet that there have been many more saints over the centuries than the church officially acknowledges.

That we honor the saints doesn't necessarily mean we agree about what to do with them. Though Episcopalians know better than to worship the saints, many of us want to do more than just drop their names now and then or hold them up as role models for small children. Others don't agree with having saints at all. We have Jesus, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit if we want to go full-tilt Trinitarian. Why engage with anyone else? Those folks argue that veneration of the saints edges perilously close to heresy. I've seen colleagues go quite pink in the face when someone suggests that the greatest of the saints, the Holy Mother, is someone to whom we might sometimes want to pray. Then there's the question of how to represent them. Episcopalians don't typically use medals or prayer cards to invoke the saints, but we do incorporate them into our liturgical art. In a 2019 All Saints' Day sermon, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams observed that many of us believe that the saints, with their exceptional devotion to God, find their most appropriate home in our stained-glass windows, safety distanced from our sinful selves. He then made a compelling case for why that isn't so.

Archbishop Williams invoked this morning's Collect, which declares that God is knitting his people together into a sacred fabric, the mystical body of Christ. "To be members of the communion of saints," he said, "is to be bound to one another in a union that strengthens us *together*." Weaving his divine tapestry, breaking down divisions and making connections, God urges us to draw in others whose company might not be to our taste. "More than just seeing the potential of people," Williams said, "it's seeing the God in people, seeing that creative force of God's unchanging, sustaining love pushing through the life of the most unlikely people and

recognizing that, if we knit ourselves with them in communion and fellowship, if we treat them seriously and are ready to receive from them, together, we can build something.” Ultimately, Williams concluded, “the saints are not ‘over there,’ the saints are not frozen in their stained-glass windows ... the saints are you and me, not because each of one of us is a perfect individual exemplar of Christian virtue and Christian seriousness ... [but] because of the God who has connected with us,” weaving us together into a fabric so strong that nothing, not even the forces of hell, can destroy it.

If the idea of becoming a saint by being bound up with other saints makes you question your worthiness, wait until you hear what Archbishop Williams had to say in his All Saints’ Day sermon ten years before. There, he focused on the passage in the Letter to the Hebrews that reads, “without us, [the saints] will not be made perfect.” We are bound not only to our Christian contemporaries, but also to the great saints of old, who in some mysterious way draw strength from us as we draw strength from them. Thus, Williams reasoned, we must assume that we will someday be equally dependent on future Christians to help us perfect our own saintliness. “So because time is not of great significance in the kingdom of Heaven,” Williams said, “All Saints’ Day is, it seems, a celebration of the future as well as the past ... we may very properly look forward to the Saints we have not yet met and the Saints who have not yet been born ... We can ask what witness we want to leave to them and turn back again to ask ourselves what is possible for us if God in Christ is truly credible in the lives of his holy people.” By Williams’ logic, neither time nor space can constrict the great tapestry of saints that God is weaving together.

But if neither perfect virtue nor utter seriousness about God is required for us to be woven into the saintly tapestry, what is? It comes down, I believe, to our willingness to step forward when Christ calls. To me, that’s what qualifies Lazarus as a saint. Lazarus and his sisters

were friends with Jesus, but nothing in Scripture suggests that Lazarus was especially virtuous before he died. Jesus routinely befriended those whom polite society despised. For all we know, Lazarus might have been a bit of a reprobate. Jesus might even have enjoyed that about him. But we do know that, when Jesus called, Lazarus defied death itself to answer. Perhaps Lazarus was just eager to live again, but I wonder whether he was at all tempted to linger in the tranquil darkness of death's embrace. If so, and if Jesus's great love for Lazarus called him out of that darkness, it must have been Lazarus' great love for Jesus that propelled him back into the light.

There are many kinds of darkness in our broken world, and many kinds of death. All but the youngest of us have probably had at least a taste of both. And yet, every one of us is here this morning, in person or online, because Jesus called us, and we came to meet him in this lovely little church. Our saintliness may not yet be perfected, but just by answering Christ's call we have stepped forward to be woven into God's great tapestry of saints. That doesn't mean we get to relax in our comfortable stained-glass windows, however. God's weaving work compels us to go wherever he sends us in search of those into whose lives he wants to insert strength and love. Traditionally, Christians have thought of the poor, the humble and the meek as those whom God sends us out to find. In our current climate, however, God may want us to seek out the angry, the bitter, and the cynical as well. It may be that God's tapestry cannot be completed unless we help him to weave in those with whom we most profoundly disagree. It's a lot to ask, but we are the saints of God, and we draw strength from the great saints who have gone before us and those who will come behind. We are the saints of God, and each of us carries a bit of the light of Christ with us into even the darkest places, knowing that we are never alone. We are the saints of God, and our work is no less than to answer Christ's call, becoming part of that great divine tapestry that even the forces of hell can never tear apart. God bless you, saints. Amen.