

Stand Firm & Hold Fast

INTRODUCTION

All Saints Sunday is one of the most precious in the life of a community of faith. It is an opportunity to celebrate beloved members of the church and to acknowledge a worldwide connection with those who claim the name of Christ. This standalone worship theme invites us to bear witness in the name of those who have gone before by standing firm in the faith and growing in love and discipleship. We give thanks to the saints we revere by living as saints in the world today.

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost – All Saints Sunday – *Love Increasing*

November 2, 2025

II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Color – Green

WORSHIP PLANNING

All Saints' Sunday is one of those celebrations with a bifocal emphasis. On the one hand it is an in-house event, a celebration of the community of faith and those who have walked as a part of the community and now have entered into God's eternity. We give thanks for their lives and witness among us, embracing the unique giftedness they shared as a part of the fellowship. While worship on this day is not a funeral for those who have died since last we celebrated, there are often elements of lament and grief that reside alongside the gratitude and celebration of life and the witness of the community as a whole. This service can be, and often is, an intensely personal one to the congregation that gathers week by week.

On the other hand, All Saints is an opportunity to look beyond the walls of the local congregation and be reminded that in Christ we are bound up into a larger fellowship made of those who look like us alongside those who do not look like us or sound like us or gather like us. We are able to push the horizons wider in order to see that we are a part of something bigger than we can imagine. On this day we celebrate the saints who have contributed to our growth even though we may have never met them. We give thanks for those who have taught us about discipleship even when they spoke a different language or gathered with different traditions. It is another opportunity to unite with the worldwide body of Christ as we worship this day.

Pay attention, then, to the writers of prayers and hymns and songs today. Let the liturgy of the day help find a way to celebrate the diversity of the faith as we worship. Let the unfamiliar rhythms and images suggest an attitude of awe and wonder at the beauty of God's people. At the same time, lean into familiar practices and rituals of this day. What have you always done as you celebrate the saints of the church? Do them again! More than that, think about them as you do them. Give space for interpretation. Why this banner? Why that procession? What have these practices meant to the people of your place throughout the years? Who is represented in the furniture and décor of the space where worship happens week after week? Claim your own history even as you grow into the history of the whole church.

PREACHING NOTES

“Why do we neglect,” John Wesley wrote in his journal, “giving honor to the saints?” Why indeed? Because we don’t notice them, I would suspect. At least that is part of the answer. We aren’t tuned into the saintly. Or at times we are offended or scandalized by it. It becomes a slur, in a way, or a way to dismiss someone. And yet we are drawn to them, to those who seem saintly. We are drawn to those who have a secret knowledge or relationship that we don’t have. Or those who seem grounded somehow, confident, at peace. We are in awe, or a little bit afraid of those we identify as saints. But should we be?

A saint, according to the New Testament anyway, is not someone who is flawless or a super believer or doer. A saint is one who claims Christ and then seeks to emulate him according to the grace given. In other words, all of us. All of those who come to church, or who wish they could, all of those who claim faith in Jesus, all of those who struggle and fail, and struggle and succeed, all of us, in other words. We are saints. And so are those who worship with us. Those who drop their kids off for the lock-in next to us. Those who stand in line at the potluck with us. Those in our small groups and our committee meetings. Those who fold the bulletins and stuff the finance letters. Those who pick up the litter that blew in from the shopping center and those who didn’t even notice it there. Those who sing the hymns and hear the words and pray the prayers with us week by week. The saints, they are all around us. They are us.

Not something we pay attention to very often though. Which is why we need a Sunday to stop and look up and see. Part of what we see is that there are those who aren’t here anymore. Most folks equate All Saints with remembering the dead. And that is an important part of what we do together. But one of the reasons for doing that is to remind us to pay attention to the living as well. None of us are here forever. It wouldn’t hurt to pay attention now and then to the saints all around us. They might have something to teach us. They might be able to help us with some knotty problem. They might add something to our lives, if we were to let them.

But what sorts of things do saints do? Follow Jesus! Well, yes, thank you, that’s it. But can we itemize a little more helpfully? Make a list. And if you want a list, who else to turn to but Paul. Our scripture for Sunday is a good list of saintly activities. Short and sweet.

Now before the biblical scholars get on me, I know that there is some question as to whether Paul actually wrote Second Thessalonians. For one thing the address doesn’t seem like Paul. Most of the time he writes to “the church at so-and-so.” This one is written to the church of the Thessalonians. Does it matter? Maybe, it could be a significant difference. One emphasizes the universality of the church is a variety of locations, the other emphasizes the particularity, or even ethnicity (of the Thessalonians) of the church rooted in a locality. The other difference is found in the verses skipped over in our passage, 5 - 10. They don’t sound very much like Paul at all. They are about the coming of the Kingdom and time of transition from this world to the next - a theme Paul mentioned. But the mood here seems different than we are used to.

So, there are grounds for doubting whether Paul wrote these words. Still the sentiment contained in our passage certainly would be affirmed by Paul and can be found in other letters with a stronger pedigree. Let us say Paul for our purposes and not worry too much about it. That’s the approach that I take anyway. What is vital is not the history of the passage, as interesting and helpful as that might be, but the message of the passage for us today.

Where were we? Ah yes, identifying saints. We're on a saint hunt, be vewy, vewy quiet. Sorry, my inner Elmer Fudd came out for a moment. These few verses give us some quick pointers on identifying saints. The Thessalonians are worried, apparently, and needed some reassurance. Paul responds to their concerns by affirming them in glowing terms. And it is this affirmation that can give us the marks of a saint.

First of all, Paul says "Your faith is growing abundantly." That is one mark of a saint, growing faith. How do we make sure that our faith is growing? Study and exercise, simple as that. What Paul is commending is the fact that they are spending time studying their faith, in Sunday School, or small groups. Reading devotionally and academically. Asking questions and testing themselves. Pushing the limits of knowledge and experience in a way that breathes new life and sustenance into their souls. "We give thanks to God," writes Paul, "because your faith is growing abundantly." A saint is one who wants to learn more.

Secondly, Paul writes that "the love of everyone one of you for one another is increasing." Which is rather convoluted phrasing. But it means they were acting out their faith in real ways. They were caring for each other, they were including, they were inviting, they were tending and healing and comforting and lifting up. They made up a body that truly loved one another. What an amazing thing. Just thing what would happen if everyone who visited our church came away convinced that we loved one another, not just tolerated one another or occupied the same space as one another but genuinely loved one another in a way that would include any who walked in as a potential "other" who would be one we loved. Wouldn't that be transforming? Wouldn't that guest be likely to come back to experience that love again? "Your love is increasing," writes Paul. You are finding new expressions, new ways of loving, new ways to reach out and connect with another life, to make a difference in another life. A saint is one who wants to love more.

Then Paul writes that he boasts "of your steadfastness and faith" even when things are going wrong. He was commending the church for staying true to the image of Christ within them even when it wasn't easy. He then goes on at the end of that chapter to remind them that they are still works-in-progress. God will make you worthy, and God will fulfill every work within you. God is still at work in a saint, they are never a finished product. A saint is one who wants to be more.

And the amazing thing is that they are all around us. They are us. Some have gone on, and we miss them. But many are still here, just under the radar. We'd see them, if we'd just pay a little more attention. If we would just stand firm and hold fast with love increasing, we might find that there are saints abounding among us.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

On this All Saints Sunday, we gather to remember teachers and storytellers who made God's stories come alive for us.

We give thanks!

We remember choir members, praise bands, organists, and all the musicians who sang and played your praises.

We give thanks!

We remember preachers and lay leaders who led our worship through the years.

We give thanks!

We remember parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings who showed us how to hold fast to the faith.

We give thanks!

We remember our church families – this one and others we have loved. We remember all those who have been a part of this faith family with whom we grew our faith and our love for God and neighbor.

We give thanks!

We remember our ancestors in the faith whose courage enables us to be here today.

We give thanks for the saints who came before us, are present here with us, and will continue after us. Thanks be to God!

Adapted from Rev. Susannah DeBenedetto and posted on **LiturgyLink**,
<https://www.liturgylink.net/2014/10/29/all-saints-litany/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at
<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2016/10/all-saints-litany.html>.

Opening Prayer

Sovereign of Creation,
all that we have comes from you.
We gather in your presence,
surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
people from every tribe and nation,
every kindred and tongue,
to lift our voices in praise,
to be transformed into your saints,
to be sent out to gather others to share the eternal banquet.
Receive the praise we offer,
work in us and through us.

You alone are holy,
you alone are the Most High,
you alone are worthy of our praise.
Glory to you, O God,
and to the Lamb, our Shepherd,
and to the Spirit that unites us all,
today and ever more.

Amen.

Adapted from Rev. Dr. Bob Gross on the Worship Ways website, https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/all_saints_day_november_1_2020/.

Prayer of Confession

Our lives are full of mistakes and errors – places where we follow self-generated idols instead of the One True God. We are not alone in these mistakes – all of those who have come before us also experienced temptation and sin. Let us come before God, just as generations of believers have done, and pray for God's forgiveness and grace.

Beloved God,

who was known to our mothers and fathers,

and even to our spiritual forebears,

have mercy on us.

We do not always love as you would have us love.

We do not always do as you would have us do.

In our stubbornness,

we turn from you when we should turn toward you.

Hold us, dear One –

comfort us when we mourn the passing of friends and family,

and help us to know that they are rejoicing in your presence.

We praise you for the grace you shower on us,

constantly forgiving our errors,

especially the ones that we don't share with any but you.

Hear now the silent fears and worries of our hearts.

A time of silence

Friends, receive this good news! Jesus taught through his words and deeds that God has already forgiven us. Thus, we and all who have come before us are rightly known as saints – the holy ones of God! Thanks be to God for God’s mercy, grace, and love! Amen!

Adapted from Rev. Lucas Keppel, Ancho Community & Corona United Presbyterian Churches, New Mexico. Posted on LiturgyLink, <https://www.liturgylink.net/2013/11/11/awareness-and-reconciliation-for-all-saints-day/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2017/10/all-saints-prayer-of-confession.html>

Benediction

Beloved, now we are the saints of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be. But we know when we let Jesus reign in our hearts, we will appear to others as a reflection of God’s Son. We leave this place determined to imitate Christ.

Written by Sherry Dobbs Johnson, *The Africana Worship Book, Year C* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 227.