

All Saints' Day

November 1, 2009

The Rev. Emily B. Richards

*For All the Saints*

Today we gather to celebrate one of the great feast days of our church year: the feast of All Saints. Through the waters of baptism we will welcome into God's household, Sophia and Keira, the two newest members of our church. Even as we look to our future with the baptism of these precious children, today is also an opportunity to give thanks for those who have gone before us and the legacy they have left us as fellow members of the Body of Christ. The Ancient Celts celebrated a harvest festival on November 1st which influenced our modern Halloween and All Saints Day festivities. This celebration came out of their understanding that the veil which separated this world from the Other world, the spiritual world, was more permeable during this particular time of the year. You may have heard of the Celtic term, *thin places*. The Celts believed that there were such places and times when we mortals were more deeply connected to the spiritual world and those abiding in the spiritual world. And so since the days of our Celtic ancestors, we have always used this time in our church calendar to reflect on our past and remember those individuals whom we consider to be our saints.

Our celebration this morning allows us to pause for a moment and think of those who have encouraged, loved and inspired us as we travel throughout life's journey. We honor today not only the extraordinary witnesses to the Gospel, but also the ordinary women and men who have been for each of us shining examples of Christ's love and compassion in our world. As the writer from Ecclesiasticus says, we praise not only

famous men and women and their deeds, but those for whom there is no name or memory and yet whose glory can never be blotted out.

Since I began my ministry here one of my greatest joys has been to visit the elders of our parish. I have loved hearing their stories about how they came to be members of St. Peter's, about their experiences of worshiping in the very crowded, yet beautiful, old church, of being bused down to what is now New Life Presbyterian Church for the overflowing Sunday School classes, and about all the vital ministries they initiated and participated in: the women's guilds, men's groups, singles and married couples clubs, educational classes and fellowship events. I also appreciated learning about the building of the new church-our current church that is over 50 years old and the ministries of all the previous rectors and how each shaped this community for generations to come. As much as the children in our parish are a blessing to us all, so are our elders. Our children fill us with a sense of hope and joy for our future. Our elders inspire us through their great love and devotion to this community. They inspire us to continue the great legacy they have built in this place. They are St. Peter's living saints.

As do the witness of our elders, this day reminds us that we are part of something larger than ourselves; that we are not called to live our lives of faith in isolation. "There is a story told of a couple sailing the Aegean Sea who arrive at a tiny, Greek island. They spot a church at the top of its craggy peak and proceed to climb. Reaching the summit, they encounter a weathered Orthodox priest leaving after his morning devotions. 'Excuse me, Father,' they ask, 'how many join you for worship?' The priest thinks for a minute before replying, 'more than 20,000, I would say, maybe closer to 30,000'. 'But Father, there can't be more than 20 people on this whole island. 'My children, this church has stood on this island for more than 1600 years. Every day we sing, 'therefore we join with saints and angels and all the choirs of heaven'. '30,000 is

probably a conservative figure.” As the Body of Christ, we are inextricably connected to one another, especially as we lift our voices in prayer and praise from these very pews. We are joined to those living and to those who have died, to those whose names we know and to those whose names we may never know. We find ourselves amid a cloud of witnesses, a “great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”

Through the sacrament of Baptism, Keira and Sophia, and each of us are not only marked as Christ’s own forever, but bound to one another, bound to this community forever. No matter where Sophia and Keira go in their lives this will be the place where they were first welcomed into God’s house. St. Peter’s, I hope and pray, will always be a community they can call home. They now join us and our elders and all the great saints of this parish as members of that cloud of witnesses that no one can count. Along with us, they are to take up the mantle given to us by those who have gone before us, those who have made it possible for us to continue our ministry as the people of St. Peter’s Church.

You see, friends, today’s celebration is finally a call to each of us to shine forth with the brightness of Christ’s love and compassion in our own generation. Through our lives, we are to offer a glimpse of God’s heavenly kingdom to those around us. I invite you to take time this day to give thanks to God for the cloud of witnesses in your life and in this parish, for all the saints, those living and those who are now in the nearer presence of God, who have loved, encouraged and inspired you. Honor them by remembering and then telling their stories. More importantly, honor them by following in their footsteps, living out your baptismal promises in this community and in the world.

*Amen.*

