

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
All Saints' Day; November 1, 2015

“For All the Saints”

Scripture: John 11:32-44; All Saints' B
Note: Preached on the Sunday of the Baptism of Kirsi Jones.

Not too long ago, I had the opportunity to spend a few weeks in the community of Saint Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco. Now, the people of Saint Gregory's Church celebrate Holy Communion in a circle around an altar that sits in the center of a rotunda with no chairs or pews. And when you enter the rotunda of Saint Gregory's Church, you can't help but notice that the room is full, even when you are the only person there. Your eyes are drawn involuntarily upward by the extraordinary colors and the perception of motion that circles the expanse of the walls and ceiling around you. You are surrounded by some ninety saints represented there in larger-than-life forms painted in the fashion of byzantine iconography, complete with golden halos and an array of dress that ranges from the stark nudity of Lady Godiva of 11th century Coventry, England and King David of ancient Israel some ten centuries before the time of Jesus, to the layers upon layers of grand finery worn by Queen Elizabeth I or Pope John XXIII. You cannot help but notice that you also see a bear, a horse, a tiger, and a wolf, who is said to be a companion and friend of St. Francis of Assisi. You will see business suits and blue

jeans, academic robes and laborer's attire, miters and crowns and headdresses and turbans, wheelchairs and walking sticks, even a saxophone. You will see persons of many races, adults and children, the strong and the feeble, heroes of faith and victims of horrendous crime. You would recognize some of them, perhaps many of them, though only one still walks the earth in our day, that one being Archbishop Desmond Tutu of the Anglican Church in South Africa.

And these saints are not depicted in some sort of placid repose, but they are active, a hand grasping the shoulder of the one next to them, a left knee lifting in rhythmic symmetry with their partners. These saints are dancing! They are dancing around the altar at the center of the floor below them. And in the center of the saints is an icon of Jesus leading the dance. It matters not that the numerous saints depicted there are not all Christians, because they are all somehow Christ-like: Muslims, Jews, Hindi, Buddhists, Native American... Architects, artists, poets, dancers, vocalists, scholars, healers, politicians, washer-women, environmentalists. All in some way, in some personal fashion, have represented through their lives the magnificent witness for truth, for respect for Creation, for love of their fellow woman and man, a work for justice, even at great cost to themselves.

On any Sunday morning with Saint Gregory's Church, as people come in from the streets ---a mixture of wealth and poverty, health and illness, brokenness and

vigor, faithfulness and skepticism--- the ninety saints are already there to greet them, already dancing in step with Jesus. And at the appointed time during the Sunday Eucharist, while everyone is gathered in a circle around the altar in the rotunda, you place your hand on the shoulder of the person next to you, friend or stranger, it doesn't matter, and you all dance, circling around the altar, lifting that left knee as best you can in rhythmic symmetry with the saints around you, above you, and with all of Creation. It doesn't matter if you cannot walk. If you are present in a wheelchair, someone dances with you or carries you.

It's the most stark, moving, and intentional depiction of All Saints' Day I have ever seen, and it happens not just in early November, but every time the community gathers round the altar for Holy Communion. Its theological embrace is broad, its inclusive tone is hopeful and unifying in a divided world. It is strangely healing and, frankly, fun. It is Good News. Gospel. Available for anyone. And, above all, it is distinctly... alive! It doesn't matter that eighty-nine of the saints surrounding you are no longer present in the flesh; they are alive with you, dancing round the heavenly *and* earthly altars with Jesus as Lord of the Dance.

In the presence of Jesus, death is lord of nothing. That is the message in the rotunda of Saint Gregory's Church. That is the message of the experience of Lazarus, called out from the tomb by his friend, Jesus. And, frankly, that is the message of

Saint Stephen's Church this All Saints' Day when we both remember the saints who have gone before us, and we celebrate the baptism of our newest saint, Kirsi Jones. We hear the words in the rite: *"We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit."* We are, all of us, by the grace of God, called to live in the Communion of the Saints. Yes, some are called to extraordinary witness; some become "heroes" of the faith. But don't get too hung up on the fame part. You see, the saints and sinners aren't always so far apart, as I'm sure the famous saints would tell us. In fact, we are both ---saints and sinners--- all the time: the heroes painted in our windows around us, and the people with whom you sit in the pews. Look to your left and look to your right; see the saints of God... Moms and dads, children both young and grown, the person you like and the person you don't, the employed and the out-of-work, the intellectual giant and the ordinary street-smart person, the one with the big house and the one in the tiny flat. The one who seems to have their faith together and the one who still wrestles with what they believe.

All of us dance together in the company of the saints, to the peculiar rhythm of the One who loves us no matter what and who calls us to love others in the same way. We celebrate All Saints' Day in the great cloud of witnesses that always surrounds us and embraces us and is a part of us. May God bless now and always the

living and the dead, those whom we love and remember on this celebration of All Saints.