

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
Sunday after All Saints' Day; November 4, 2018

“Madness, For All the Saints”

Scripture: Psalm 24 (All Saints Year B, RCL)
Note: Preached on the Sunday of the Baptism of Ailie Helen Jones.

I'm sure we all can be forgiven if, in the earnest rush and fervor of the All Souls' / All Saints' holiday season, we missed the significant observances of the eminently important All Brackets' Day, celebrated each year since 2009 on the same day as the Feast of All Faithful Departed, November 2nd. You know... All Brackets' Day? Brought to us by the Supreme Executive Committee of *Lent Madness*? That annual contest of the popularity of the saints, when 32 lucky saintly participants are selected from throughout history and geography to be paired in conversational combat via the internet, subject to the judgment of thousands of people like you and me who vote to determine “Who is the Greatest Saint?”

Hmmm... Stick with me here, because I promise this all has something to do with us, something to do with you, in fact. But my guess is that right now the congregation can be divided into at least four different camps:

- Those who have no idea of what I am talking about
- Those who couldn't care less about what I am talking about

- Those who seem to remember something about this Lent Madness thing, and
- Those who have learned to rabidly await the annual commencement of the contest, who can't wait to pick their favorite saint and pit themselves against their fellow St. Stephen's contestants.

If you really have little or no idea about *Lent Madness*, think basketball. Yes, basketball. Think on the annual craziness surrounding *March Madness*, when 64 college hoops teams are paired up to play until only one undefeated team remains standing, thus being declared national college basketball champions for the year. People all over the world join fantasy contests, fill out their brackets, and select the teams they believe will make it all the way to the finals. Money changes hands, sleep is lost while glued to the TV, friendships and marriages are strained, but somebody comes out on top. Well, *Lent Madness* is the same... only better. Cut the number of initial contestants to 32 and make them saints instead of mundane sports teams, and you've got a real contest for the ages! People of faith all over the world fill out their brackets, selecting the saints they believe will make it all the way to the finals. Sometimes as many as 8,000 people vote for their favorite saints, and the saints with the most votes proceed through the rounds to the finals. We score those brackets filled out by members of St. Stephen's Church to see whose predictions turned out to be closest to perfect. And we proclaim the winners in the congregation who had the foresight to select the winning saint. It's fun. It's exciting. It's nerve-wracking

sometimes. And in a strange and somewhat moving way... it's faithful. And I'll share why I think so...

You may have noticed that our road-side sign posts a message from time to time for passers by to see that says "All are welcome here. Seriously. All." And most every week you see a statement near the front of your Sunday bulletin that says the same about St. Stephen's Church: "All are welcome here. Seriously. All." And in a half-humorous but entirely sincere narrative, we say what we mean by "all"... Soccer dads, hockey moms, vegetarians, bacon lovers, single, married, widowed, divorced, straight, gay, tattooed, not tattooed, young, old, and in-between, seekers, doubters, and those who just happened to see the place and stopped by, and more. But the point is not that we necessarily consider ourselves so progressive or liberal a community as to welcome everybody, but rather that we are coming to understand that all of us, each and every one of us in this wide world, falls under the need of the grace of God, no matter who we are and where we come from. So, to that end, we say all are welcome. Anyone who comes bringing earnest questions about life and God, who seeks community in which to know grace, who comes in peace, not to disparage their fellow seekers, but to travel a road toward faith with them... well, you're welcome here. I recently had a newer member of the community share with me how much she appreciated that "mission statement", and I thought to myself...

that's exactly what it is: a mission to be open to each other through and by the grace of God. That's why you are welcome here, and why I am welcome here.

Which brings me back to *Lent Madness* and all the saints. We tend to think of the saints as heroes, but mostly they are just people of the "all are welcome" crowd who take that word and that work seriously. In the 2019 bracket of saintly *Lent Madness* contestants, you will find beekeepers, slaves turned bishops, former mistresses of important and heartless men, patron saints of prostitutes. You will find Nicholas of Myra, better know as St. Nicholas, or... yes... Santa Claus. A personal favorite of mine. You'll find those utterly hard to understand men and women who cared for the sick, who contracted leprosy in Hawaii while living in a leper colony. You'll find an Episcopalian who penned one of our most beloved Christmas songs. You'll find Mary and Martha of Bethany, mentioned in our gospel reading today, friends of Jesus. You'll find members of parliament, international missionaries, first century female doctors who studied what we now call clinical depression. You'll find poets, playwrights and dramatists, people of many ages, races, and status. And that is what we mean by the Communion of the Saints. We can name a bunch of them, but the Communion of the Saints are simply those who responded to Jesus' all are welcome call. That means you and me too.

Here's how it works. Come. Pray. Offer. Greet. Repeat. The stream of life in God's Spirit acting within St. Stephen's Church will carry you from there. It was just three short years ago that I was invited to the home a new family of St. Stephen's Church who shared the same ancestral name of my own mother... Jones. Ann and Brennan welcomed me in to meet Kirsi, their daughter, who was baptized with this congregation on All Saints' Sunday in 2015. The Jones family was both welcome and welcoming. Today on this All Saints' Sunday, three years later, we're expanding the Communion of Saints by one, baptizing little Ailie Helen Jones, sister of Kirsi. And that's something of how faithful welcome works and grows. I'm not saying we're perfect at that. But it isn't perfection in person or in community that makes us part of the Communion of Saints. I think the grace of God does that. So we can make that earnest effort to recognize a gracious welcome... first, the welcome we receive from Jesus, then the welcome we share with others seeking a faith community, and the welcome we have received and are receiving each Sunday we gather. Hey, saints understand something about that magnanimous gift of the love of God through good times and trying times.

So, happy All Saints' Day, saints. Congratulations Jones family, and welcome, Ailie. And happy All Brackets' Day to *Lent Madness* veterans and those newbies who will participate in the contest this coming Lent 2019. All are welcome. Seriously. All.