

**Saints Cannot Be Browsers**

Acton Congregational Church (ACC)

6 November 2022

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Texts: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18  
Hebrews 12:1-2

*“we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”*

~ 2 Corinthians 4:18

**Prayer**

**Eternal God,**

**Today we give you thanks for the great cloud of witnesses**

**That surround our church and the Church Universal.**

**We are grateful for each person we have encountered**

**That have touched our lives with their love and faith.**

**We are especially thankful for the lives of loved ones**

**who have gone before us.**

**Help us to listen attentively and receptively to your Word proclaimed this morning,**

**That we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us**

**Until we are united with you in that place beyond the veil of death**

**You have prepared for all your saints. Amen.**

***“Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine,***

***et lux perpetua luceat ei.***

***Requiescat in pace. Amen.”***

Many of you, especially those who sing in the choir, know the words of this ancient Christian prayer. You all certainly have heard them in Requiem Masses set to evocative musical arrangements by Bach, Mozart, and Verdi among other great composers. As far as we know, this prayer began to appear in tombstones in Europe sometime in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and was quickly woven into Catholic funerals as a petition on behalf of the dead, especially the ones believed to be in purgatory, that they might find peace. The Roman Catholic Church’s Handbook of Indulgences states that a partial indulgence can be gained by the soul in purgatory if the deceased’s loved ones recite this prayer daily.<sup>1</sup>

***“Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord,***

***and let perpetual light shine upon him.***

***May he rest in peace.”***

***“Requiescat in pace.”*** These were the words that were prominently displayed next to my father’s picture in the brief announcement of his death. ***“May he rest in peace.”***

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Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

My father died suddenly last Tuesday morning, on All Saints' Day. He was 91 and lived a full and very successful life. We were not as close as I would have liked and grew further apart after I left Brazil to attend seminary in Virginia. My religious vocation remained a baffling mystery to my father, and he took little interest in my life on this side of the Equator. Still his death shook me to the core, and I knew that my brother, who's currently working on a Ph.D. in Portugal and, like me, would not be able to be at the burial on Wednesday, would feel dad's passing even more intensely. So, I rushed home as soon as I could to video call him. As we began to talk about our shock, our sadness, our memories, our conflicted feelings about the father we knew and the man who died, I realized there's indeed great truth in William Faulkner's Southern wisdom, "***The past is never dead. It's not even past.***"<sup>2</sup> For as another Southern writer, Greg Iles, reflecting on this widely quoted Faulkner's line said, "***All of us labor in webs spun long before we were born, webs of heredity and environment, of desire and consequence, of history and eternity. Haunted by wrong turns and roads not taken, we pursue images perceived as new but whose provenance dates to the dim dramas of childhood, which are themselves but ripples of consequence echoing down the generations.***"<sup>3</sup>

We carry the past in our DNA. Our present is shaped by the lives of our parents, grandparents, and ancestors we never met as much as they are molded by our own lived experiences. The past still lives in all of us. The people who poured their well-lived, complex, and imperfect life stories out into us do not vanish when they die, part of them goes on living through us. The rupture of death may be permanent, quite often difficult and sometimes unbearably painful to live through, but, whether we like it or not, our spiritual, emotional, and genetic connections with our loved ones who died outlast their last breath. There are memories and narratives, choices and trajectories, goodness and badness, brokenness and wholeness that bind us to the dead in our lives. Our identities are forged in the fire of the beliefs, values, passions, dreams, struggles, failures, victories, prejudices and expectations of those who have gone before us. Our aspirations in many ways grow out of our past. Oftentimes, we are not even fully conscious of the power those generational ripples have over our habits, our choices, our fears, our ambitions, our rages, our radiance, our sense of self-worth, our relationships and over the direction of our lives. The poetry of our traditional hymn for All Saints' Sunday is dead-on when it claims that we are indissolubly linked to "***all the saints who from their labors rest.***" There is an unbreakable continuity between us who still "***feebly struggle***" and the dead who "***in glory shine***" because "***all are one.***"

Jesus of Nazareth invented the ritual of the Lord's Supper – this table of thanksgiving where we gather monthly to remember his self-giving love and his death – to transform his life into spiritual nourishment for generation after generation of Christians who have feebly struggled to pattern our lives after his teachings. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus instructed his closest friends to eat the bread and drink from the cup on the table as if they were consuming Jesus' own body and blood. The evangelist, trying to accurately convey what Jesus meant, added a sentence to the institution of Holy Communion that we do not find in any of the other Gospels – "***Do this in remembrance of me.***"<sup>4</sup> In the original

Greek text, the noun translated as “*remembrance*” means much more than an act of pious recollection or an instruction to memorialize Jesus’ last meal before his crucifixion. Luke chose a word with a more vigorous definition to remind the communion of saints that when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we are very deliberately, very intentionally, bringing to mind the death of Jesus to better understand the meaning of his life and teachings. Every time we come to the table, we are making ourselves remember the story of faith we have inherited and will pass down to other followers of Christ. In this sacred ritual, we hear Jesus’ words echoing from the past through the voice of the minister at the table, “***Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you;***”<sup>5</sup> “***Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.***”<sup>6</sup> Our eating and drinking at Christ’s table keep the life of Jesus tightly threaded through our own living. By making his body into soul food and his blood into spiritual drink, Jesus made sure the Church would not forget the purpose of his life and those of us who sit at his table would claim kinship with all the baptized faithful throughout the last 2,000 years who have come to the table to receive the spiritual nourishment that can sustain us in the race of faith.

All Saints’ Sunday is a day to remember that there is a continuum between our past and our present, then and now, before and after, our ancestors and us, the mortal and the eternal, between the dead and the living whether the dead are parents who just died or personal saints whose faith inspired you to follow Christ long ago or unknown saints who came into your life serendipitously bringing with them a whiff of the fragrance of God’s love at the moment you most needed to feel God a little closer.

The late Frederick Buechner’s definition of saints is one of my favorites. Buechner said, “**In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.**”<sup>7</sup> I love this image of our loved ones who are now dead, our saints, flawed as they may have been, as hankies permeated with the scent of God’s love. And I wonder if the best way to give thanks for the saints we are remembering today is to borrow Jesus’ brilliant and holy invention and turn our saints, their whole selves, the entire lives into sacred nourishment for our souls, hearts and minds so their stories may continue to flow out of our lives on this side of the veil of death.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, just before writing the verses I read this morning, took his readers on a spiritual journey back to the past. His primary audience was a small community of faithful Christians enduring fierce persecution from Rome. People were scared. They were fearful for their lives. The future seemed uncertain, dangerous and unpredictable. To help them remember that they were part of an intergenerational and living faith that stretches across time, the writer put together a list of names of people who held on to their faith even in the face of hardship, imprisonment, flogging, doubt, fear, and uncertainties: Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Samuel, and David are some of the names listed in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews. Time and over again, the writer encouraged his readers to avoid looking back to the people he named with nothing more than nostalgia. Instead, he urged them to let the dead past spill into their living present. He

insisted that the faith of those who had gone before them could still speak to the whole church and give them the strength to be strong and brave and persevere in the present.

Last Wednesday night, I wanted to find some distraction from my thoughts, so I binge-watched the new four-part series *“Inside Man”* on Netflix. The story is a crime-thriller. The central message of the series is about escalation. Any good, decent person under pressure could do the unthinkable, even commit murder. I won’t spoil the show for you by going into all the details, but I have to say that the vicar and his wife keep making very bad decisions, which they say are unavoidable. Whether the plot conveys a clear sense of inevitability for the vicar’s actions is another story, but in the series the vicar ends up holding his son’s math tutor in the vicarage cellar against her will. She has seen pictures of child pornography on a flash drive the vicar’s son gave her and assumed the young man is a pedophile. In an attempt to protect his son’s future and the identity of the suicidal church worker who had asked him to hide the flash drive, which the vicar had no idea contained images of child sexual abuse, the vicar is convinced that he cannot let the math tutor go. He and his wife begin to entertain the possibility of murdering her.

At one point, the vicar decides that the only way to let the math tutor walk out alive is by making her and the police believe that the images on the USB flash drive are his. His wife protests. She tells him that if he carries out his plan, he is going to destroy his family. Mary, the vicar’s wife, cannot understand why Harry does not give the church worker to the police. Exasperated, Harry says, ***“I tried. I can’t. He is a vulnerable person. I have a duty to protect him. It’s the only right thing to do, so... I’m doing the right thing. I have to do the right thing. I’m the [expletive] vicar!”***

Mary interrupts Harry, ***“and [you’re also] a husband... and a father... But, oh no, it’s all about that half-wit fairy tale you pretend to believe every Sunday.” “You think I’m pretending?”*** Harry asks his wife in disbelief. ***“The thing about that half-wit fairy tale; it’s the only religion in the world where God dies at the end. People say they’re Christians, but you know what? You never see them nailed to anything.”*** Upset Mary protests, ***“Darling, he doesn’t die. He comes back.”*** Harry replies, ***“That’s the hope.”***

As soon as I heard Harry’s words, I couldn’t help but think that saints are people who do nail themselves to something. They nail themselves to hope and truth and forgiveness. They nail themselves to justice, to the wellbeing of other human beings, to the protection of non-human lives, to the teachings of Jesus, to faith and to the promise of life that lasts and endures. Saints persevere. They understand that we only live once and they refuse to spend their time among us jumping from passion to passion, from opportunity to opportunity, from place to place, from relationship to relationship in order to live life to fullest. Saints give themselves entirely to the people they love for the long-haul. They understand that we are tiny links in the chain of history, so they are not afraid of making a commitment to let others around them experience the joy of meaningful human connections and the depth of life-affirming relationships that bring together past and present. Saints are prepared to fight for as long as it takes for the things they believe in.

They won't settle for an attachment-free lifestyle. Saints nail themselves to what is eternal in our life stories and in our faith.

Pete Davis, the author of *"Dedicated: the case for commitment in an age of infinite browsing,"* said in a podcast<sup>8</sup> aired on October 17<sup>th</sup> that too many people in today's world want to live untethered, carefree and spontaneous lives that are open to infinite possibilities. These people prioritize fleeting experiences over long-term investments. Their motto is *"don't settle for what is in front of you when something else amazing could be out there somewhere."* Pete believes that the modern world is all about infinite browsing. He uses Netflix to make his point. Late at night, you want to watch a movie so you start browsing Netflix looking for a film. You can't pick anything, so you scroll through the different titles, read a few reviews and you can't commit to watching any given movie. Thirty minutes later, you realize that you did not choose anything to watch. You were on the menu screen the whole time and now you are too tired to watch anything.

Our society has become addicted to the notion that to be happy, we have to experience as many possibilities the world can offer here and now as possible. Forget the past. The future be damned. Keep the options open. Stay on the menu screen of life for as long as you can. Don't commit. Hold on to the freedom to keep wandering. Don't walk through any of the doors in the hallway of life. We live only once. But when people finally wake up from their haze, the untethered life of infinite possibilities becomes exhausting, stressful, meaningless and even boring. Some browsing is important and even needed in life, but the most radical thing we can do is to commit to a particular thing, a cause, a place, a profession, to each other, to a community, to the Church, to God, to Christ, to letting other doors close and forgoing other options.

Saints cannot be browsers. Saints are people of faith who throughout history put out a sustained effort to share the scent of God's love and the life of Christ with the church and the world. They picked a lane and stuck to it. Their dedication teaches us that love is not a feeling but a commitment we make to each other, especially in the hardest and darkest moments of life. Saints understand that when Christ becomes our spiritual nourishment, we commit ourselves to be nailed to this great cloud of witnesses that connects us to the long-haul saints of our past and give us hope that someday others will remember you and me as people of courage who dedicated ourselves to the race of faith without taking our eyes off Christ.

Friends, the past is never dead. Our loved ones who have died are still with us. So let us give thanks for the saints in our lives this morning. Let us honor our saints by allowing our memories of the past to flow into this service of remembrance. As you bring back to mind your saints, hold on to these words Anne Lamott said, **"You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And**

**you come through. It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly – that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp.”<sup>9</sup>**

Thanks be to God for all our long-haul, committed saints who now rest from their labors. Requeiscant in pace. May they rest in peace. And as we learn to live and dance with their memories in our broken hearts, may we commit to living as faithfully as they did. May we be nailed to the words written to the Hebrews that today speak from the past to our present – ***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”***

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Culture: Prayer of the Dead – 2

[<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/prayers/view.cfm?id=926>].

<sup>2</sup> William Faulkner in Requiem for a Nun, p. 86

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Greg Iles in The Quiet Game, p. 270.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 22:19.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 22:19.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 14:23-24; Matthew 26:27-28.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Buechner in Beyond Words, p. 352 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>8</sup> The Happiness Lab with Dr. Laurie Santos in You Only Live Once... So Commit, 17 October 2022

[<https://www.pushkin.fm/podcasts/the-happiness-lab-with-dr-laurie-santos/you-only-live-once-so-commit>].

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Dr. Alan Wolfelt in Grief One Day at a Time, p. 15.