

C All Saints' Day 2025
St Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA
The Rev David Rider
November 2, 2025

In a world fraught with anxiety, we gather this morning to celebrate the Feast of All Saints

As our culture wrestles between our higher and lower angels, sainthood celebrates those higher angels amid the Great Cloud of Witnesses, providing us with inspiration via role models who make doing God's work seem so effortless

At least on an annual basis, we pause to reflect on what it means to be holy, shaped by God's overwhelming grace, while thanking God for those saints who have gone before us and indelibly shaped our spiritual DNA

If that's not enough, we'll then gather around God's Table to break bread in communion with each other and our God

Not bad for an hour's work

Upon reflection, it becomes obvious how we might benefit from the annual celebration of the Feast of All Saints'

This festival dates back to the fourth or fifth century, which makes it among the oldest of the Church year, perhaps as old as the celebration of Christmas itself

From the earliest days of the Church—especially the pre-Constantinian Church under the threat of martyrdom for its belief—Christians

celebrated the witness of individual martyrs on the anniversaries of their deaths

So martyrdom became the original criterion for sainthood—who wants to sign up after worship?

As time passed, the Church observed more and more martyr-death anniversaries that were sprinkled—and perhaps dissipated—throughout the year

By the 7th century, a centralized feast day came to aggregate many heroes of the faith, whether or not they had suffered martyrdom

Eventually the date migrated to November, a time after the harvest that assured sufficient food on hand for joyful celebration of the Great Cloud of Witnesses that shaped the Church, past and present

For centuries, therefore, we have known that it takes the Great Cloud of Witnesses—to raise a child and shape our identities as beloved gifts from God

As we do so, however, let's reflect on what it means to be a saint, because saintliness remains a central goal of Christian living

We can, of course, talk about saints with a capital S

These Saints represent the spiritual elite, those in every generation who run the human marathon, who conquer their demons and overcome their frailties to serve God in unique and decisive ways

Or we could look closer to home, to those who have shaped the spiritual heritage of this parish, or perhaps to beloved role models in our own families of origin—those heroes whose quiet witness has touched the core of our very being

If nothing else, the Feast of All Saints embodies the extrovert's dream come true, because we witness that human community—past, present and future—trumps any post-modern angst or brooding about loneliness in the universe

Pop quiz: are we a group of saints gathered today, flawed but saintly by God's abiding grace?

Or does that sound too haughty and presumptuous?

Or, if holiness is a synonym for saintliness, are we a holy people gathered here today

Again, does that sound too haughty and presumptuous?

Your answer might say something about your self-confidence or humility, but it also might reflect your own upbringing in a more Catholic or Protestant household and culture

Ponder this question, but also hold it until January when a Wednesday morning study group explores the Catholic and Protestant roots of our own Anglican DNA

Back to sainthood itself

Even as we celebrate sainthood, however, let's not get too starry-eyed about human community

Whether at church or at home, each of us can list a few curmudgeonly people we'd just as soon not emulate

Every biological and spiritual family has its eccentric relative it would rather keep chained in the attic

Further, each generation has its collective failure of nerve, whether in Christian proslavery advocates of the 19th century or our own 21st century's struggle with the mysteries of human sexuality

So on All Saints Day, we neither romanticize the human condition nor do we indulge in neo-pagan ancestor worship

Rather, on All Saints Day, we recognize that we have saints in our blood and skeletons in our closet

We stand on the shoulders of giants who have gone before us, yet we remain compromised by bedeviling sins that pass from generation to generation

We remember before God all those who have so shaped our lives, whether it be the wise ones, the overbearing ones, the broken ones or the whole ones, the lay or ordained mentors who have left their mark on us, warts and all

We remember before God with thanksgiving those whom we admire and who have touched our lives in positive ways

With respectful distance, we also ponder the painful mysteries of those who have damaged us or have passed on dubious values like human prejudice, mean-spirited bias or melancholy living

On All Saints' Day, we admit that life is a package deal, even in our biological or spiritual families

We live amid the Great Cloud of Witnesses, some of whom are wonderful and some of whom are, at best, downright quirky

We tap these saints who have lived down through the centuries, who come from our family genealogy and, importantly, and who shape us in this very parish community

On All Saints' Day and during times of parish transition, we take off our rose-colored glasses and, instead, celebrate our common bond with the crucified and risen Christ

We worship the Savior who knows us by name before we leave our mother's womb, who holds us in God's love when we finish this earthly journey

Our Christian faith strengthens us to live more deeply into our engagement with a world built not upon infantile fantasy but upon the mature mysteries of joy and suffering

God grants us no 'passes' but God does promise to be with us on both sides of the grave, sanctifying our every move, beckoning us toward holy living, and providing us the fragile—yet blessed—community of saints with whom we live and move and have our being

St. Luke's Beatitudes and The Great Cloud of Witnesses—both down through the centuries and throughout our parish family—help us grasp God's hope that we live into holiness, into wholeness, and into self-giving service to this world

These, my friends, serve as the marks of saintly living—the moral values that parish community helps us to attain: personal holiness, personal wholeness and joyful self-giving service to God's world

As we are baptized into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, as we are drawn into the divine life, we are set aside—not 'above' or 'beyond', but 'aside'—to accomplish God's work in this world

All Saints' Day has become a common feast day on which to renew our baptismal vows, which we will do in a minute

During an actual baptism, we say these powerful words: "John or Jane, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever"

We are marked for our entire lives: we join the Great Cloud of Witnesses and dedicate our lives to loving God with all your heart, soul, body, mind, sexuality, being and spirit

We rub elbows with saints and vagabonds in this earthly journey

Amid the formational dynamics of home, church, school and community, we develop the Godly capacity to claim the good, to serve God and His world

As we renew our own baptismal covenant this morning, we remember a prayer that illuminates the Feast of All Saints

Immediately after baptizing the candidate, the Presider prays that God may grant the new Christian an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works

May this prayer waft over each of us this day, may this prayer infuse the spirit of our nation, and may this prayer serve as the guiding vision for the time that we share together as a parish to saintly service.