

Rev. Mary Bea Sullivan
Farewell Sermon, November 6, 2016
The Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit, Alabaster, AL
All Saints Propers Year C

Today we commemorate the communion of saints—

We honor our being knit together with those who have come before us, some of whom we just named in the litany of saints, those who are present today, and those who will come after us.

- growing up I thought saint was perfect
- saint is not perfect
- A saint is someone who is sanctified, or made holy

- We believe we are all made holy by God calling our names at baptism

We who were loved by God before we were knit in our mother's wombs, are by our baptism knit into the womb of this community. We claim one another, claim our roles in each other's lives, making claims on each other. We are committing to love one another with so much grace we will embody it on the playground, in the classroom, and at the office and around the dinner table.

growing up I thought a saint was someone who had died, but we, you and I are also a part of the communion of saints.

That said, On All Saint's Day, there is a greater sense of how thin the veil is between us, those who are living now, and those who have gone before us. We honor all of the holy ones, the early church mothers and fathers, Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther King, our parents and grandparents; we remember brothers and sisters and children, who have gone on to their glory with God.

I love the visual of the great cloud of witnesses described in the 12th chapter of Hebrews

“Since we are surrounded by a great 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.”

We are running this race together with all who have been initiated into the faith through baptism.

Pamela Cooper-White says, “We do not baptize to make people pure or perfect. Baptism immerses us in the waters of life and death so that we are able to die to loneliness and alienation, to die to the need to rely on our own strength.”

Thank God it is not up to us to run this race on our own strength...

We are sustained by the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit present in our lives, the Spirit in particular attributed with the ongoing growth in the faith ...the sanctification, the making holy, of our lives.

Eucharistic Prayer...priest makes the sign of the cross: sanctify these gifts, make them holy. Sanctify us also—make us holy we pray...make the sign of the cross as a physical reminder of our desire to grow into our sainthood, to grow into holiness.

Thank God it is not up to us to run this race on our own strength...

We are sustained by the cloud of witnesses, the saints who have gone before us... by their influence in our lives, by their example, how they they live on in us, and how they pray for us.

Thank God it is not up to us to run this race on our own strength...

We are sustained by growing in the faith in community—this is not a lonely pursuit, it is communal because we need one another...those who are easy to love, and those who are challenging, those who are conservative, or liberal, or independent, those who are visionaries those who are disillusioned, those who are men, women, black, brown, yellow, white. gay, straight, young, old, single, married...

ALL knit together by a Creator who sees the pattern in a way we cannot see. ALL of us saints made in the image of God.

The sanctification comes, the being made holy happens as together with God we wrestle with ordinary details such as preparing a festive parish meal; or in the extraordinary tasks such as prayerfully choosing a new spiritual leader.

The race we are running-it is a spiritual marathon...but we need not fear, we are a resurrection people, a people of hope.

We continue to hope as we run the race toward humility, simplicity, the race toward justice and generosity, the race toward loving our enemies.

oh help me these are spiritual marathons.

REALLY JESUS—our enemies...how am I to love even those who hate me?

This is not a race for the fainthearted. Thank God we are not running this race alone.

Because Jesus' claim on us is total, and it is not an easy claim—don't match hate for hate...love our enemies, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us...

This is a spiritual marathon... thank God we are not running this race alone.

We have Jesus, we have the cloud of witnesses, and we have one another.

I am acutely aware that we are gathered here on mine and Malcolm's last Sunday with you. My friends, as we prepare to depart as your pastors, we give thanks to God for you and we thank YOU

Thank you for the honor of running alongside you for this segment of the race.

As I reflect back on all that has happened since we first came that Monday before Lent in 2014, I am amazed at your generosity of spirit.

You have been radical in your hospitality and welcome to others; courageous in your choices; sacrificial in your giving; creative in making what to many would seem a small amount of resources into having great impact in this church and greater community.

You made space for me to learn my way, first as layperson-in-charge, then deacon-in-charge, and finally rector. You hosted my ordination a glorious occasion that touched so many people, some of whom had walked away from church, but you gave them hope.

You have made space for Malcolm and me to maneuver the potentially land mine of pastoring together. Thanks to God and to you, this has made our marriage stronger and I pray made us both better priests.

Along with the wise and patient and loving guidance of Alison and Stan, for whom I am incredibly grateful, you have schooled me up in the ways of the priesthood.

I know that at times that has cost you. For that and any other pain I have caused you, I am deeply sorry.

We cannot thank you enough, you have:

- loved us
- taught us
- forgiven us

- laughed with us
- wept with us
- allowed us to bless your babies in the womb
 - and bless your loved ones breathing their last
- honored us by accepting our gifts and abundantly sharing yours.

Thank you, each and every one of you. Serving with you has been a joy and an honor. God is present here at Holy Spirit in a palpable way.

Look around—you are gazing at a multitude of saints; these are your brothers and sisters in Christ.

In these next few months as you move through this transition, I have faith in you. I have faith in God—be gentle with yourselves and one another,

love one another,

listen devoutly to one another,

sacrificially offer your time and your financial resources to the life of this parish.

Because I have seen the way you graciously live into your inheritance of love and forgiveness, I have faith in you—that your hearts will be opened in new ways with new saints.

Because I have seen the way God has blown new life on this congregation, I have faith that God is preparing a beautiful way forward which in this moment we do not yet see.

Malcolm and I will be cheering you on. We love you.

Yes, we depart from the role as your pastors in this congregation, but we remain your friends, and more importantly are forever knit together through the mystical body of Christ in the communion saints. Thanks be to God.

Amen.