

**Sunday Sermon**  
**November 5, 2017**  
**Ephesians 1:15-23**  
**Hebrews 12:1-2**  
**“A Community of Saints”**

**Introduction:**

Today is All Saints Sunday. On the Protestant church calendar, All Saints Sunday comes one week after Reformation Sunday. And we Protestant Christians are never quite sure what to do with the title saint. We think of a saint as someone half-human, half-angel. Yet the New Testament counterpart for the word saint does not mean morally perfect or unalterably good. It means simply “set apart.”

The apostle Paul considered all members of the body of Christ saints. Look at the salutations of many of the epistles attributed to Paul. “To the saints who are in Philippi. To the beloved of Rome who are called to be saints.” The chapter of our first lesson for today begins:

“To the saints in Ephesus. I give thanks for you,” Paul says, “for your faith, for your obedience and love to Jesus Christ. You have not forgotten that Christ is the head of the church. You know Christ rules the church. You have become his church, his body on earth, and I thank God for you.”

You see, a saint is any Christian, anyone called by God, blessed, and baptized in the Spirit and “set apart.” Ordinary people called and blessed to do extraordinary things for God.

Today we will say the names of those who have died in the past twelve months. We know they were not perfect, but they were “set apart,” and we give God thanks for the ways they blessed our lives and others. We pray not for their souls, for we trust they are in God’s presence and God’s love. Rather we pray in thanksgiving for the gifts and specialness these individuals shared.

And we pray for those who still feel emptiness and loss because of a loved one who is gone. We pray for awareness that the departed one is part of the “great cloud of witnesses.” And then we pray that the Holy Spirit will empower us to be saints unto others.

**I.**

Who are your saints? Thank God for them, what you learned from them and how they blessed you. Family members who have been there for you, a Sunday school teacher who taught you the biblical stories of God’s love, a youth leader who was there at a critical time, a pastor who prayed with you when you needed it, a member who called you when you lost your job, someone who brought you a meal when you were sick. All those in “the great cloud of witnesses” who have blessed you.

## II.

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin that clings to us, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” our second lesson from Hebrews says.

Dr. William Barclay, in commentary on Hebrews, suggests that the unseen “cloud of witnesses” are witnesses in a double sense. Their earthly life was a witness to their confidence in Christ, and now, having won the crown of life eternal, they witness our performance in the arena of life.

It is as if the saints are in the stands watching and cheering for us as we are on the field. And knowing that not only makes us try harder, it also encourages us on the way. It gives us the courage that we did not know we had, to do things we did not know we could do.

This week, the world watched as the Houston Astros and the LA Dodgers competed in games 6 and 7 of the World Series. There was a good deal of discussion, of course, by sportscasters and journalists about what would happen in the games. “Can the Dodgers do it?” one commentator asked. “No doubt the greats of former Dodger teams are watching and pulling for them. Those watching here on earth, such as Sandy Koufax, and those watching from the stands in heaven, like Jackie Robinson and Don Drysdale.”

In the final game, it was the Houston Astros who came out as champions, their first ever World Series title, played not in their ballpark but in Dodgers Stadium. After winning, Houston players were asked, “Was it difficult for you playing in the opponent’s ballpark with such a small percentage of the crowd there pulling for you?” “No,” the players answered, “when we took the field we felt the presence of all of Houston, watching and cheering for us.”

Last Sunday when we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation by dedicating pew bibles and hymnals, I felt those reformers looking on and cheering that we had the Word of God in our hands and in our language. When we celebrated the 220th anniversary of the founding of this congregation and the glorious music lifted us up, I felt like those who organized this congregation and those who envisioned and gave for this worship space were looking down saying, “Yes! That’s what we were envisioning, what we were hoping for!”

## III.

But our calling is not just to look back but also to look forward.

John Churchill, ancestor of Winston Churchill many generations back, was a successful soldier of his day. Once when John won a decisive victory over the French, the queen was so grateful and impressed that she made him the Duke of Marlborough and built for him a palace.

Not long after all the accolades were heaped upon him, Sir John was asked by one of his peers at court, “Your Grace, whose descendant are you?” The Duke

replied, “Sir, I am not a descendant. I am an ancestor.”

We are not just descendants. We are ancestors.

In the next week, we will do three important things: We will elect local leaders. We will honor our veterans of military service. And we will prepare our hearts and our pledges for Consecration Sunday.

As we go through this week, we will come face to face with our indebtedness to others: those who are willing to step forward and serve as leaders, those who served and sacrificed, some even giving their lives so that we can go to the polls in freedom and safety, and those who sacrificed for this church so that we can worship, fellowship, learn and grow in our faith here. Our lives are full with gifts from others.

It has been said about a parent’s love, “You cannot pay it back; you can only pass it on.” That is true of God’s love. It is true of the heritage of faith we have received from our ancestors.

We have been given the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Faithful stewardship requires us to “pass it on” here in worship and education, out there in mission and outreach.

We have wonderful church buildings built by previous generations. Faithful stewardship requires us to maintain and enhance those buildings for future generations.

We have a beautiful earth with rich resources. Faithful stewardship requires us to respect it and pass it on in good condition to the next generation.

We have resources that allow us a comfortable standard of living. Faithful stewardship requires us to share from our resources, passing on to those without.

God has used previous generations to sustain and enrich our lives. Now we are called to be not just descendants, but ancestors in the faith.

Conclusion:

We ordinary, flawed, and imperfect individuals are called and “set apart” to be saints to others.

Today thank God for the saints who are watching and cheering for you. Ask God to make you a saint. Amen.