

Title: Witnessing to Christ
Date: 11/6/2022 (All Saints, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Daniel 7:1-3,15-18](#); [Psalm 149](#); [Ephesians 1:11-23](#); [Luke 6:20-31](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/QHBmmOYMNLw?t=1490>

In the words of St. Paul,
I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know him,
so that, with the eyes of our heart enlightened,
we may know what is the hope to which he has called us,
what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints. (adapted from Eph 1:17-18)
Amen.

In 2011, I attended my very first Easter Vigil. Before that, I was all about the Sunrise Service on Easter morning. Even when I was spiritual but not religious, I'd find my way to that service every so often. There was something about gathering in the dark and cold of night, reading and singing as the sky grew brighter, the air grew warmer, and the sun climbed higher in the sky. We worship with ALL of our senses, and the symbolism of this was simply...chef's kiss.

Then I came to the Episcopal Church and learned about this service that happens the night BEFORE. A friend shared that given how crowded Grace Cathedral got on Easter morning, the intimacy of the Vigil felt like family supper. Because of my travel schedule, it took another year before I could experience it for myself. By that time, I'd gotten more involved and had also come to know and love some of the people in the congregation.

It was a beautiful service, solemn and simple and symbolic in a way that engaged ALL of our senses. Right before the final blessing, the entire congregation was invited to the front of the church. As we sang "Jesus Christ is risen today," everyone streamed down the aisle and gathered in loose concentric circles around the altar. Standing there among them, looking around at the faces of my fellow siblings in Christ, people I knew and people I didn't know, this overwhelming sense of JOY and LOVE poured out of me.

I thought to myself, "**This** must be what the Communion of Saints looks like!"

I'd heard the words "communion of saints" at every Eucharist, and I'd pictured it as the saints we see in our side chapels and in our windows, or as ancestors hanging out together, hovering over us.

The priest who walked me through my first Instructed Eucharist talked about how when we come to this altar, we aren't just coming together with everyone else gathered here. We are also coming together with everyone who has come to this altar before us, and everyone who will come to this altar after us.

We aren't just joining with everyone who has gathered, is gathering and will gather in **this** place, but with everyone who has gathered, is gathering and will gather around an altar or holy table across all of time and all of space.

I love that imagery, AND it wasn't until THAT moment that that imagery sank down into my heart and my body. In that moment, I knew in my soul and in my bones that the communion of saints looks and feels like **all of us** receiving, accepting and reflecting the luminous love of God between among us.

It looks like the body of Christ living the life of Christ in this world. It looks like the body of Christ living the life of Christ in our workplace, among our family members, in our neighborhoods, and given that Tuesday is election day, at the ballot box.

This is what the saints have done throughout the ages.

Early saints were martyrs. Most were known for the spectacular and gruesome ways they died. Yes, they were killed for refusing to renounce their faith. However, this wasn't just a matter of identity or belief, it was because following Jesus with their body had implications for the world they lived in.

Following Jesus changed their public life and their private life.

Their relationship to their community was transformed. They no longer participated in the public worship of the Roman emperor, and they were staunch monotheists in a society that has long been polytheistic. Their relationship to their family was transformed, especially women who valued their identity as a follower of Christ more than they valued their identity as wife or daughter or mother.¹ Christ was the head of their household, not their father, not their husband.

This threatened the security of those whose authority was granted to them by culture and tradition. To them, stability and prosperity came from keeping things as they were. Jesus was about reversals, and these *Christians* were upsetting the proper order of things. To preserve their way of life, these dangerous influences had to be removed.

This is the reason many stories about the early saints involved a court scene where they have the chance to publicly confess their beliefs...and then are very publicly killed. They were stoned, burned, beheaded, mauled by animals, to name a few. The word "martyr" means witness, and the essence of their witness to the life of Christ was boiled down to suffering and dying like Christ.

However, giving up our life doesn't always look like dying. As George Washington tells Alexander Hamilton in *Hamilton: The Musical*, "I was just like you when I was younger. Head full of fantasies of dyin' like a martyr? [D]ying is easy, young man. Living is harder."²

Dying as a form of public witness to faith is still with us to this day, but as Christianity became more established, more institutionalized, living a life of spiritual discipline

became the new form of public witness. Suffering for Christ looked less like dying, period, and more like dying to self, dying to one's old life. Suffering for Christ looked like transforming one's body and soul by living an ascetic life. Think Desert Fathers and Mothers. Think monastic communities. Simple. Set Apart. Structured. The soul stripped bare.

St. Francis of Assisi, St. Benedict of Nursia, and St. Ignatius of Loyola all grew up in noble families. They all gave up their comfortable life and their riches to turn toward God and live as Christ did. People were drawn to them, to live with them and follow them. Over time, these ad hoc communities became monastic communities with a rule of life. This rule unified their life of prayer with their life of labor so that the world may be transformed through their prayer and labor.

In their own words, the Benedictine Rule revolves around five practices: prayer, work, hospitality, study, and renewal, and it asks for commitment, conversion and obedience.³ The Rule is so effective at getting people to work well together and move in the same direction that it is used as a guide for modern business managers.

The Jesuits practice Ignatian spirituality, and they go into the world as “contemplatives in action, discerning God’s desire for [their] lives here, now, and acting on God’s invitation.”⁴ The Ignatian Examen is a nightly practice that helps us to “pay careful attention to how the Spirit is moving in each moment of our daily life.”⁵

The Franciscans are inspired to “live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel” and “follow the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶ There has been a marked difference in the statements coming out of Rome and in the kind of public life a pope lives now that a Franciscan holds that position.

Today, as we celebrate All Saints’ Day, I wonder how we can translate the lessons of these early saints into the present day. As neither martyrs nor monastics, what will our public witness look like? How will we witness to the life of Christ?

I don’t think it’s going around and telling those who are poor and those who are hungry that they are blessed. I don’t think it’s telling those who are weeping that they will laugh, or telling those who are hated, excluded and reviled on account of their witness to rejoice because their reward will be great in heaven.

Neither are we called to tell those who are rich and those who are full that they are cursed. Nor should we tell those who are laughing that they will mourn and weep, and those who are praised for their witness that they are false prophets.

This sounds different coming from us. This sounds like a bad way of offering spiritual care. This part is for us to reflect on, for us to keep in our hearts. This is a reminder to get out of our fixed mindset; things *can* change, and things *will* change.

How will things change? Things will change when we love our enemies, and do good to those who hate us. It requires us to bless those who curse us and pray for those who

abuse us. It means turning the other cheek and giving our shirt to the person who takes our coat.

This sounds like encouraging, enabling bad behavior. But if we hate our enemies and do evil to those who hate us, that doesn't change anything, either. This is about interrupting the cycle. Those who curse us are probably used to being cursed, those who abuse us may have been abused themselves. If we can do it without causing further harm to ourselves, flipping their expectations rather than fulfilling them might spark some kind of reversal, if not now, then maybe in the future.

This is the work of saints. This takes practice. It takes a rule of life that unites our life of prayer with our life of labor. This helps us build new habits so that we can interrupt evil, harmful cycles instead of perpetuate them. This takes dying to our culture's definition of "winning" and "success."

The communion of saints is the body of Christ. The body of Christ, past, present and future is the communion of saints. We are not simply brought together by our beliefs, but by the way we witness to these beliefs by practicing them, by living them out in our church, home, workplace and, one more reminder, at the ballot box. May we witness to these beliefs with such love and joy that more will come to join us around the altar.

Amen.

¹ For this section on the early martyrs and monastics I consulted my notes on the lectures of Bruce Gordon and Christopher Beeley

² <https://genius.com/Christopher-jackson-lin-manuel-miranda-leslie-odom-jr-and-original-broadway-cast-of-hamilton-right-hand-man-lyrics>

³ <http://www.benedictfriend.org/the-rule.html>

⁴ <https://www.jesuits.org/spirituality/>

⁵ <https://www.jesuits.org/spirituality/the-ignatian-examen/>

⁶ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/christianity/roman-catholic-orders-and-missions/franciscans>