When we hear the word “saints,” depending on where we are coming from, we may hear different things. We may think of those canonized into sainthood, or of out of this world perfect, blameless people, maybe “old” people, the New Orleans football team, or just plain people with halos. We may think of people who lead exemplary lives like Mother Teresa, St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, or Peter and Paul. While some of these may very well be saints, that is not what we are referring to when we say “All Saints Day.”

Originally, All Saint’s Day was a day to honor the martyrs that were not known to the church in general. Later, it became a tradition to honor any people of faith that had passed onto the next life.

In order to understand this within the context of the Christian church, the early church thought of themselves as “saints.” For example, when Paul wrote his letters to churches, he used the word “saints” for the church, “to the saints in Ephesus,” “to the saints in Philippi.” In these writings, Paul was addressing the body of believers, saying that we are all saints by virtue of our baptism into Christ by the Holy Spirit. As children of a Holy God, we are initiated into the church by his saving, justifying, and sanctifying grace.

So, when we ask the question: who is a saint? Or, am I a saint? The answer is every believer and child of God is a saint not by virtue of personal merit but by virtue of being born again through faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This theological understanding is the basis for this Christian tradition of All Saints Day.

We celebrate this occasion by remembering not only our loved ones but Christians of every time and place, honoring those who lived faithfully and shared their faith with us. This has nothing to do with them serving as mediators between us and God, but with honoring their life and faith witness as they may continue to encourage us to love God and our neighbor through their legacy.

The apostle Paul speaks to this in Hebrews 12:1-3 when he says,

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, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Paul is speaking about the people that lived a faithful life and that have gone before us and how their life is an example to follow and to be encouraged by. He refers to them as a “cloud of witnesses.” His point is to make us aware that we are not alone that God is with us as much as God was with them. He uses this to encourage the living to live a faithful life. And, that as we consider their witness, we may not “grow weary or lose heart” as we go through trials, challenges, and difficulties in this life.

Today, as we remember our loved ones that have gone before us and as we listen to Paul’s words of encouragement, I want to take this opportunity to challenge each one of us to consider not only the lives of those that are asleep but our own lives as we continue to be here.

Let me begin by saying this: death is real, sooner or later it will happen to us. We need to talk about death if we want to live the way God intends for us to live. It is hard to understand life without first understanding death.

There is the physical death when we stop breathing, and our heart stops beating. This is usually the first thing that comes to mind when we think of death. Images pop up of being by the bedside of a loved one, or attending a funeral, or visiting a wake. We think of cemeteries and memorial flowers and dedications. But there is another kind of death, the death that happens when we find ourselves going through the motions of life, the emotional and spiritual death that creeps up on us without us knowing. Our bodies continue to function, but we are leading a life without vitality or at least without the drive and desire to live.

One example to illustrate this is when we fall asleep at the wheel. We continue to move and “drive,” but we have no sense of reality.

Many times, we find ourselves to be asleep at the wheel of life. We roll through one day and into the next with only a vague impression of what has transpired in between. We may find ourselves sitting at our desk, or operating our equipment, or learning in a classroom, and we feel neither frustrated nor indifferent. It’s not like we are not aware of what is going. We are quite content with our work. We consider it a good day to go through the routine day after day without change, without conflict, without variation. But we are just going through the motions without asking if there is anything else in life for us. We are existing, but we may not actually be living.

Or, it could also be that we are experiencing death in life because of disappointments, betrayals, and conflict that have hardened our hearts and have made us cynical and bitter, without care about other people. We are not who we are used to be, but now we may not even recognize ourselves. This not living either, and perhaps is worse than just existing for it disfigures the person who God created us to be.

In any of these cases, we become entombed in our daily lives.

If our saints could speak to us once again and give us advice from heaven, we probably would hear what we already know but are afraid to accept. They probably would tell us to forgive those that have done wrongs against us, to be merciful and compassionate with all people, to love and care for our family, to not let our work take over our time and energy from our loved ones, to pray, sing, read, respect and honor others; to have faith in God and the next life. They will tell us loud and clear: wake up, live a good life! And they will guide us out of the tomb!

This month, as we remember our saints and also give thanks to God for all that God does, let’s hear also the words of the apostle Paul when he said, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Ephesians 5:14).

Jesus is the one that offers us awakening, the removal of our wrappings of death; it is the one that calls us out from the tomb to a new life. Not an improved version of our old lives through knowledge or counseling or training or purchases, but an actual resurrection to newness of life previously not experienced. Jesus tells us that he is that life. We know that we can cry out to Jesus as Martha and Mary did, and we know that we have a God who loves us very much and will weep with us in our times of frustration and helplessness.

And, Jesus is not alone; he uses the life of the those that have gone before us to point out the exit out of the tomb and he uses the life of those we have right now to do the same. As you can see, there is a wide, transcending cloud of witnesses encouraging and cheering up for us. These are the saints of old and the saints of today who remind us where we came from so we will know where we are going.

My grandmother was my first witness in life about the Christian faith and now continues to be a witness as I too raise my children. You see, the cloud of witnesses provides us with the roadmap of life: how they lived their lives give us directions on how to live ours too. They encourage us.

And the great realization is that we are part of that cloud of witness too. We are blessings others already, today. Our actions and words may well be the life-giving, life-saving gift for someone else too.

As we celebrate and reflect upon the life of those that have gone before us and as we recognize the gift we have in one another here and now, I encourage each one of us to open our ears, minds and hearts to the calling of God for each one of us to teach us and remind us of how we're supposed to live. A calling to live as children of light, to live as saints too.