

When we hear the word “saints,” we may hear different things depending on where we are coming from. We may think of those canonized into sainthood in the Roman Catholic tradition or of out-of-this-world perfect, blameless people with halos. Perhaps we think of kind, patient, and self-giving people we view as special. However, when referencing “All Saints Day,” we need to consider a broader context that includes each of us, too.

Consider this: the early Christian church identified themselves as “saints.” For instance, Paul, in his letters to various congregations, referred to them as “saints” – such as “to the saints in Ephesus” or “to the saints in Philippi.” Here, Paul signified that every believer is a saint, not through their deeds, but by their baptism into Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Thus, if we are wondering, “Who qualifies as a saint?” or “Am I a saint?” the answer is this: every believer is a saint because they are children of God who have been sanctified by being born again through the Holy Spirit. Being dead or performing miracles is not a requirement for sainthood, but welcoming God’s love and grace is. This is what our Wesleyan theology of Christian Perfection teaches, that is, being a saint does not imply a life free from error or mistakes or having supernatural abilities but a profound inner transformation where we draw closer to God, welcome his grace, and embody his love in every aspect of our lives.

This means that our understanding of sainthood is not as mediators between God and us but as witnesses of God’s love that encourages us in our faith journey. It also means we all can aspire to such a life of faith, love, and holiness where sanctification is not contingent upon our merits but happens through faith and grace in Jesus and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, guiding and teaching us.

As Methodists, this is the theological understanding of the basis for this Christian tradition of All Saints Day. We celebrate this day by remembering our loved ones and the Christians of every time and place who transitioned to the next life—there and forever—honoring them for faithfully sharing their faith with us and leaving a legacy behind that guides us here and now.

The book of Hebrews speaks to this in Hebrews 12:1-3,

“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.”

Though disputed by some, the author of this letter is believed to be the apostle Paul. In this letter, Paul is speaking about the people who lived faithful lives and who have gone before us and how their lives are an example to follow and to be encouraged by—including the people he named in the previous chapter as heroes of faith. He refers to them as a “cloud of witnesses.” This “cloud of witnesses” is the saints who lived and finished their lives walking alongside God. They were individuals like us—living, breathing, and grappling with life’s complexities. They loved and

struggled just like we do. Their true distinction was not in their perfection but in allowing God's love and light to shine through them, illuminating their actions, words, and intentions.

Furthermore, Paul also references Jesus as the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith" to encourage the readers to consider his endurance against evil and sin so that they may not grow weary in their own struggles against sin.

What's the purpose of Paul referencing the "cloud of witness" and Jesus' struggles and victory? Paul references both to motivate us through their example and provide us comfort and perspective. Just as they persevered through trials by faith, we are called to persevere in our Christian lives as the saints of here and now. Knowing that those who came before us also faced challenges and struggles yet overcame them through faith gives us the strength and confidence to live our lives in solidarity and with hope.

For this, the key word is "witness." By Paul using the word "witnesses" to speak about the faithful, he implies that though they are not present in our lives in the flesh, their memory and legacy still can teach and guide us in this life.

So, as witnesses, if our saints could speak to us once more and give us advice from heaven, what would they say to us? Perhaps they would speak of celestial wonders or divine mysteries. But, if we truly listen, we might hear them remind us of something profound yet straightforward: to cherish life and to be agents of good in this world. They would tell us to be grateful for every day we get because life on this side goes fast. They would say that though life is sometimes harsh with its ups and downs, it is always a gift, reminding us to embrace each day and give thanks, find joy in the small things, and celebrate the little victories. They would say all these things because they lived and experienced long enough to understand what truly matters in this life, and they would not want us to miss it.

What else would they tell us? What kind of witness would they give us? They would also encourage us to be driven by and pursue life with faith. The saints were not without flaws. They faced challenges and made mistakes just like we do; however, what made the difference in their lives was to be driven by faith because faith gave them purpose. For this reason, I am certain they would urge us to keep the faith, to grow in faith, and to be guided by faith so we can embrace who we are meant to be and do in this life.

I also believe our saints will invite us to build bridges and be agents of good. In a world that often focuses on divisions, the saints would remind us of the power of empathy and unity. They would inspire us to build bridges of understanding, compassion, and love. They would say to us that every day is an opportunity to help make things better in other people's lives and the world. They would tell us that every day presents us with countless opportunities to make a difference. They would encourage us to seize these moments by aiding those in need, comforting the sorrowful, standing up for truth and justice, and spreading love and faith.

But perhaps one of the most important things they would tell us is to forgive those who have wronged us, to be merciful and compassionate with all people, and to love and care for our family and friends.

My friends, on this All Saints Day, let us be inspired and challenged by the lives of those who have gone before us: our mom or dad, grandparents, spouse, siblings, friends, any and all those whose lives are an inspiration and invitation to live as saints. Let us learn from their journeys, struggles, victories, and unwavering faith as powerful testimonies to all of us. Let us remember that sainthood is not reserved for a select few, but it beckons each one of us here and now.

Here is the invitation and good news: As we honor and remember the saints, let their lives be a beacon, guiding us toward a path of love, service, and righteousness. Let us be inspired to live our lives in such a way that we, too, become witnesses of God's grace, leaving a legacy of faith for future generations. As we leave here today, may we carry the torch passed down by the saints, shining brightly in a world that needs the light of Christ now more than ever. And may we always remember that in the eyes of God, through his grace and our faith, we, too, are saints. Amen.

All Saints Day Liturgy

As we remember our loved ones today, may that also give us encouragement and hope for our future. Let us remember them by calling their names...

- On-screen pictures and names of those who passed this past year (play bell)
- Then, invite the congregation to name any other loved ones (background music)

Prayer / Liturgy

Minister: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

People: And also with you!

Minister: Let us pray together. Lord God, by your grace we are running a race.

People: We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

Minister: Patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets and psalmists, disciples and evangelists, martyrs and saints.

People: We thank you for their example. We praise you for their lives of faith. For all your saints, O Lord, who strove in you to live, who followed, obeyed, adored you - our grateful hymn we sing.

Minister: Lord God, by your grace we are running a race.

People: We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

Minister: Loved ones now resting in you, who guided us, nurtured and cared for us; ancestors who worked and traveled, lived and died that we might be who we are, where we are--your precious children in this community of believers.

People: We thank you for their example. We praise you for their lives of faith. For all your saints, O Lord, who strove in you to die, who counted you their great reward - accept our thankful cry.

Minister: Lord God, by your grace we are running a race.

People: We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

Minister: Family members and members of this congregation; fellow believers in every country, every denomination; friends who help, guide and uplift us-- children of your family, sheep of your fold, saints of your redeeming.

People: We thank you for their example. We praise you for their lives of faith. For this, your name we bless, and humbly pray anew, that we like them in holiness may live and die in you.

Minister: 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,

People: and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,

Minister: looking to Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

People: Amen.