

## Exit, Not End

Saint is a wonderful word. A bishop of Sweden once said “saints are those who make it easier for us to believe in God.” Robert Louis Stevenson said, “Saints are sinners who keep on going.” All Saints’ Day is a powerful day in the church universal. The deliberateness with which we remember, name, pause and give thanks honors those who have gone before us, and calls us to examine our lives and ways of living. Though faith comes only from God, we learn how to recognize and embrace it from others, from the saints we have known. I invite you to take a moment and give thanks for one or two of those saints who have shaped the faith that has brought you here today.

Death is a horrible word. Death means loss, pain, grief. Death is the ultimate loss of control. Death makes us feel powerless. As a society, as a community, as a family, we are trained to not speak of death. Death is a word we try to avoid, using phrases like passed away, entered into life eternal, entered into rest. It is difficult to see, to think past death, it seems so final.

Yet, as people of faith, as those who have learned from saints, looking past death is how we are taught to understand and find life. Without death, there is no resurrection. Without death there is no ultimate healing. Without death there is no complete reunion or union with God.

Death looks different from the other side. Like the image from Revelation where God wipes away our tears, so looking at death in the light of eternity dims the horribleness and highlights the holiness. The people of faith have been more successful in capturing this holiness in song. Perhaps it is the words “when Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamations, and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart” - or “in our end is our beginning, in our life, eternity – in our death a resurrection and at last a victory” help you embrace this deeper reality of death.

Certain areas on the banks of Scotland have been called “thin places” by residents of the past. This term comes not from the lack of oxygen in the atmosphere, but because it has been believed that the division between earth and heaven is less apparent in these places. Many have experienced such “thin places” as the presence of those they have loved and lost to death is felt in real and powerful ways. One such moment for me was at the birth of my oldest daughter.

Jim’s life and the man he is today was deeply impacted by Grandpa Bull, and his death while Jim was in high school was heartbreaking. Yet in the Navel hospital room following the birth of Dea, Grandpa Bull’s presence and joy in the moment was undeniable. To this day the memory of her birth is linked with the comfort and warmth of his presence.

It is the songs and the “thin places”, both experienced and shared by others that help us to believe that death is only horrible from one point of view. Scripture and faith allow us

to believe that death is not the end, no matter how surely it feels that way. We know and proclaim that death is simply an exit. It is transition, it is moving on, moving forward, moving towards God and goodness. This is where we find the ability to celebrate the saints, to be aware of the great cloud of witness which is cheering us on.

Exploring our understanding of death and moving, by faith, to understand it from an eternal perspective brings us peace as we face the deaths of those we love and our own eventual passing. Yet we should not stop at that personal comfort. Imagine that great crowd of witnesses – cheering us on. *On to what* is the question we should consider.

They are cheering us on to living as saints, calling us to live so that others will find it easier to believe in God. Just as we are the body of Christ in this day and time, so those who have come before us now use our hands to reach out in love, or hearts to share love and forgiveness.

To pause and to name is not an end into it's self. We pause and name in order to remember, just as we remember Christ in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. We remember not as a mental exercise, but in order to bring back to life. We are given the ability to share those aspects of life, character, service, honor, which our saints shared with us. We are to make their lives count by continuing their work, modeling their forgiveness, embracing their courage. We are to choose to be like them, just as we are to choose to live as Jesus lived.

What did you remember when we paused to remember those who were saints in our lives, those who helped us to believe? Who is it so impacted your life that that impact has not been lessened by their death. What might God do with and through you if you choose to embrace the power of your life and faith, your call to sainthood – to living so that others might experience grace, goodness, forgiveness, love and eternity.

We believe in the communion of saints, in the thin places, not geographically but by faith. Hear them cheering us on – hear them calling us to live fully and to celebrate that they have moved closer to God, yet not apart from us. Hear them calling our names, and calling us forth into new life.