Sprinkled throughout the year are days on which the Church remembers the life and contributions of particular people. Whenever these days fall on a Sunday, I like to try to tell a little something about them. Two weeks ago, we celebrated Luke the Evangelist, author of the third gospel in our bible. We call these people “saints,” holy ones of God, because their stories and their gifts help us to see more clearly the ways God is at work around us.

Today’s celebration, the Feast of All Saints, started as sort of a catch-all holiday for all the folks who didn’t get their own days on the calendar. Even early in the Church’s life, there were a lot of people lived and died pointing to God, but who were never known beyond their families or their hometowns. There were people killed for their faith whose stories were unknown to the Church, but who the Church wanted to honor for their witness. The day after the Feast of All Saints is the Feast of All Souls, the day when all the “normal” people get to be remembered and recognized, too, for their much smaller, but still significant contributions to the lives of the faithful.

But more recently in our Church’s history, we began to recognize something. We began to see that it’s not just the “famous” saints like St. Luke and St. Francis and St. Julian of Norwich and St. Mary Magdalene that point people to God; even “normal” people, people like you and me, are integral in pointing others to God. The Feast of All Saints became the day on which we remember all the people who have pointed us to God in our lives, and when we pay attention to the fact that each of us is also a saint, pointing others to God, whether we know it or not.

Two weeks ago, on the Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist, I told a story about Stephen Colbert and how he had suffered an immense tragedy in his life, but managed to avoid becoming bitter by learning to love that thing he most wished had not happened. When I told that story, I left out a very important part. When the reporter asked Colbert how he had suffered what he had suffered and managed to arrive where he was, his answer was two words: “MY. MOTHER.” The interview continues:

“He was tracing an arc on the table with his fingers and speaking with such deliberation and care. ‘I was left alone a lot after Dad and the boys died.... And it was just me and Mom for a long time,’ he said. ‘And by her example am I not bitter. By her example. She was not. Broken, yes. Bitter, no.’ Maybe, he said, she had to be that for him. He has said this before—that even in those days of unremitting grief, she drew on her faith that the only way to not be swallowed by sorrow, to in fact recognize that our sorrow is inseparable from our joy, is to always understand our suffering, ourselves, in the light of eternity. What is this in the light of eternity? Imagine being a parent so filled with your own pain, and yet still being able to pass that on to your son.”

Mrs. Colbert is for Stephen a saint: not because she was perfect or didn’t sin or never got angry, but because she saw the “light of eternity” and showed it to her son. She was just an average, ordinary, everyday person doing the best she could with what she had, and that makes her a saint.

I have another story for you, a story much closer to me. I shared that, like Colbert, I also lost a parent at the age of 10. When my mom was being consumed by cancer, I know that she had doubts. I know that she felt angry and hopeless and frustrated. Even as a kid, I suspected that, in spite of the face she put forward, these things must be true. And yet, in the midst of all the struggling, the pain, the hopes raised then dashed, the running out of options, she always had faith. She had faith that, in spite of all of this, she was beloved by God, and that would mean that this would not destroy her or her family. And it didn’t—by her example.

I also wrestled with those questions and doubts and frustrations. I wondered how God could let this happen, why God didn’t intervene, what kind of world had God created that could hold so much pain. But I overheard her one night talking to a friend on the phone, explaining how she thought that maybe this wasn’t something God had done to her, or let happen to her; that maybe some things just happened, and that the love of God is evident in how God walks with us through these things. She didn’t even know she was doing it, but she gave me language to work through my own suffering. She gave me hope. That hope carries me to this very day. She is a saint, because she pointed me to God.

Now, it’s easy to look at these two women and see God at work; but this holiday challenges us to look deeper. This is the Feast of All Saints, not the Feast of Obvious Saints. When Jesus proclaims the Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount, he doesn’t say “Blessed are the pious,” or “Blessed are the righteous,” or “Blessed are the people who make you feel warm and fuzzy inside.” He said “blessed are the poor in spirit.” He said “blessed are the meek.” He said “blessed are the merciful.” These are not blessings; they are curses, handicaps, hurdles to be overcome. These are not things that bless us so much as they are things that burden us; and yet, Jesus says, to be these things is to be blessed. Why? Because that is how we see that it is not us and our virtue that declare God’s love, but the way God’s love meets us wherever we are at.

And so, on this Feast of All Saints, we are also challenged to recall the distinctly un-saintly saints, the people who more often disgust or disturb us than delight us. Take for example, St. Fred Phelps of Kansas. St. Fred is not known for his kindness or his generosity, but for his hatred, his vitriol, his ham-handed and harmful abuse of Scripture against God’s beloved LGBTQ children. The man was a bigot and an instigator; but the way he and the Westboro Baptist Church misused scripture got the attention of a lot of faithful Christians and forced us to figure out what we believed about the Bible and homosexuality and shake us out of our silence and complacency. The man caused a lot of harm; but contrary to his intentions, God also used him to rouse a sleeping Church and call us to justice and acceptance. You can’t call Fred a good man, and I’m not trying to; but it’s undeniable that he also, in spite of himself, pointed us back to God. As in all of life, our sorrow and our joy come hand-in-hand, inextricably intertwined in the light of eternity

I could go on, but you get my point. The ways that we are blessed by God’s saints, don’t always feel like blessings; but that’s exactly what points us to God. God takes imperfect, broken, sinful people and redeems us, reclaims and repurposes us so that even our imperfection, our brokenness, and our sinfulness makes God’s saving love known.

If God can do this with people, God can do this with anything, even the “great ordeals” we face in our lives. St. John suggests that even these trials and persecutions and tragedies that plague us are, paradoxically, an opportunity for us to see God seated on the throne and to lift our voices in praise. It makes about as much sense as washing a robe in blood to get it clean, but there it is. Sometimes the light of eternity shines brightest in the places where we are most broken.

This is not to say that suffering is the only way to experience God or that we should seek it out; God knows that there is suffering enough without anyone inventing more. The whole point is that God can use anything and anyone—painful or pleasurable, “good” or “bad”—to point us toward the love of God that is, even now, bringing about the fullness and the health of all creation.

Tragedy provided the opportunity for the witness of Stephen’s mom and mine. Hatred provided the opportunity for Phelps to bend hearts and minds toward mercy and compassion. These saints and others—too many to be counted—all sing together the song of praise that turns our vision to see the mysterious and powerful love of God. This love is so powerful and so complete that even the forces of sin and hatred and destruction can only feed its work to continue creating the world good. This love encompasses all the saints—the righteous and the wicked—and redeems them into this new creation.

This is what we are celebrating today; not just the lives of the people we love and respect and miss, not even only the lives of the people we dislike and distrust and only begrudgingly include among the family of God: we celebrate the love of God that turns blessing on its head and spins tragedy into comedy; the love of God so powerful it creates everything out of nothing; the love so powerful it pulls all saints, all souls, all creation inexorably towards its center, a center bright with the light of eternity. We celebrate that this love of God, drawing all creatures to itself, lives, though it was slain; that it is victorious, though it was thought to be defeated. Behold this love, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.