Saints, Thin Places, and St. Eddie

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The church celebrates November 1 as All Saints Day. The old name was All Hallows Day, with the evening before known as All Hallows Eve, which became Hallowe'en. For many people, All Saints Day is a thin place, a concept which comes from Celtic Christianity, which flourished in Ireland and parts of Scotland, Wales, and northern England from the 5th century. A thin place is a place or an occasion or a time in which we experience the divine more closely, when the veil between this world and the next is especially thin.

Thomas Merton experienced a "world that is absolutely transparent; God is shining through it all the time." Most of us don't always notice God shining through the world. Thin places reveal glimpses of the divine. In thin places, the difference between the physical and the spiritual vanishes, and we experience God "more nearly, more dearly, more clearly" in the words of St. Richard of Chichester (1197–1253).

As a Celtic saying notes, "heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places, that distance is even smaller." Contemporary poet Sharlande Sledge writes,

"'Thin places,' the Celts call this space,
"Both seen and unseen,
"Where the door between the world
"And the next is cracked open for a moment
"And the light is not all on the other side."

A thin place doesn't need to be a place. It can be a piece of music ... or a work of art ... or a person in whom we experience the presence of the Spirit. For me, mountains are thin places. So is All Saints Day.

It's hard to say why, precisely, since such experiences of the numinous, the holy, are often hard to put into words. I am overtaken by wonder and the possibility of grace. On All Saints Day, I ponder those people in my life who have been signs of grace, joy, and love. I remember gratefully all the saints who have peopled my life, who have touched my life in deep and personal ways.

What is a saint? Laurence Housman, the early 20th century English novelist, wrote "A saint is someone who makes goodness attractive". Nathan Soderblom, Bishop of the Church of Sweden from 1914–1931, said that "Saints are persons who make it easier for others to believe in God." The Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard says that a saint is someone whose life manages to be a "cranny through which the infinite peeps." Poet Francis Thompson writes, "To most people, even good people, God is a belief; to the saints, God is an embrace." And Frederick Buechner has a wonderful image for a saint: "In God's holy flirtation with the world, God sometimes drops a handkerchief. Those handkerchiefs are called saints."

In the New Testament, saints are people made holy and whole by God's love. A saint is someone loved by God. For me, that includes everyone, even those who are hard to love.

One such person was a northern Ontario Cree man named Eddie. He showed up at my door one day in my first parish in northern Ontario, looking much the worse for wear. "Hey bud! My truck is empty, and I need some gas money to get home." We talked for a while. He seemed on the up and up, so I gave him $20. Oh, I felt so good. I was doing what a minister should do!

Later that afternoon, as I walked to the post office, I saw Eddie sitting on the sidewalk outside the liquor store, lifting a brown paper bag to his mouth. He looked up at me, grinned, and without embarrassment or awkwardness, said, "Hey bud! You caught me, huh?"

After that, Eddie came to the house every Tuesday to ask for money. I never gave him any, but we would invite him in and make him a sandwich and hot chocolate each time. He became a fixture in our lives. We got to know him, and he got to know us. He'd play with the kids, and they would laugh and giggle.

I call him St. Eddie, even though he wasn't particularly holy or wise. In fact, he was about the most pitiful person I knew. He was dirty; he stank; his breath was awful; he was always looking for a fix.

But Eddie showed me something about God. He taught me something about what it means to care about other people and about being in community. Eddie gave me more than I ever gave him.

Three years later, one spring, they found Eddie in a snowbank, frozen to death. He had fallen asleep one winter and never woke up. It was a terrible loss for me, and my family.

That is the All Saints miracle. Eddie showed me something about God's extravagant love, about God's passionate embrace. God's light shone through this very broken man, through the cracks in his life and the cracks in my life.

I don't mean to romanticize his life. Poverty and addiction sucks. It's hard; it's dirty; it stinks. But part of what happened was that with Eddie, we didn't have to pretend. He wasn't anxious, not when I caught him outside the liquor store, not when he came to the door every week. He didn't try to impress us; he didn't grumble; he just came asking for help as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

This thin place of All Saints Day teaches me again that Christian faith remembers people differently than the world remembers them. Secular history is the story of conquerors, the powerful, the unscrupulous. Faith remembers those who tried to make the world a better place, and those who are otherwise overlooked, the ones whom history considers to be expendable.

Faith says all people are valuable, and this thin place of All Saints Day reminds me again of gospel priorities.

Where are the thin places in your life?