



All-Saints Sunday

Memories

Brian Mattson - 11/02/2025

This is All Saints' Sunday. In our tradition, we always observe it on the first Sunday after Halloween, which is actually another holiday that arose from the All Saints' Day celebrations. There's actually a little bit of interesting history around this time of year, so let's jump into a short history lesson with Pastor Brian, courtesy of my recent Wikipedia deep dives. And yes, I did fact check a few of these claims.

In the 4th and 5th century, the Early Church began the practice of using a common day, a shared day, to celebrate martyrs of the faith. This tradition was widespread, but there were different days of remembrance in different areas. Some celebrated the saints around Easter, others after Pentecost. According to the 1913 Catholic Encyclopedia, in the 8th century, Pope Gregory III consecrated a chapel at the Basilica of St. Peter and made that chapel's day of remembrance November 1st. Around a hundred years later, Pope Gregory IV extended the celebration day of November 1st to the entire Catholic Church.

This became an established part of the church calendar, eventually stretching multiple days known as Allhallowtide. The primary event was the feast of All Saints' Day, but the night before was a vigil known as All Hallow's Eve. This later became shortened to what we know as Halloween. The day following All Saints' Day is All Souls' Day, where the church remembers *all* the

faithful departed, not just the saints. This practice carried on after the Reformation and has been included in most mainline Protestant churches today.

I love history. Isn't that fascinating? I have always enjoyed reading and learning about the past and how it shapes our present and future. One of my favorite things about history classes in middle and high school was that even if the teacher was boring, you could always read the captions on the pictures in the textbook. There was always something funny or strange or interesting in there that I'd never heard before. That happened once my sophomore year. The teacher was exquisitely boring one day, so I started flipping through the textbook and came across one of the strangest bits of history I ever recall. It's called the Great Molasses Flood. Have you heard of it before? It happened in 1919 in Boston. A tank filled with 2.3 million gallons of molasses burst and a 15 foot wave of sticky sludge rushed down the streets at an estimated 35 miles per hour! The damage was extensive and 21 people died in the catastrophe, while another 150 were injured. That is nuts!

My freshman year history teacher was not boring. He grabbed our attention on the first day of the year. Let me set the scene. It was my very first class on the first day of my first year of high school. The nerves were real. We were freshmen, straddling the line of kid and adult, and we didn't really know what to expect. We were all in our seats excitedly chatting when the door closed loudly behind us and this gruff-looking, veteran teacher strode through the center aisle of the room. Mr. Pittman turned around to face us at the front of the class and asked us a question that is burned into my memory. It was a question unlike any we had been asked before. He removed his glasses, looked around at our blank faces and asked, "Are you a product of your environment or is your environment a product of you?"

We were completely silent. I don't think anyone moved or breathed, like we were trying to stay hidden from a t-rex. The silence persisted so he asked his question again. Our freshmen brains were not prepared for this sort of

psychological torture. I think Mr. Pittman knew exactly what he was doing, though part of me wonders if he just liked watching 15 year olds squirm. He was teaching us a valuable lesson. He was teaching us that it was time to start thinking differently. We were growing up and it was time to use those big brains of ours, gosh darn it! So there we were, struggling to use our brains that had never been asked questions like that before. It was 8am and we were probably a little tired and anxious, it being the first day and all. And now we were expected to just blurt out an answer to an incredibly new question and, honestly, a new way of thinking.

As the deafening silence began to eat away at our nerves, some of us began to crack. Answers were divided. Some agreed that we were the product of our environment, while others believed our environments were the product of us. I don't think Mr. Pittman had a dog in the fight, but looking back now, I can unequivocally say I believe we are the products of our environments.

That introduction to high school is a memory that will stay with me forever. It's interesting which memories stay with us, isn't it? Some super small, insignificant ones stick around, while the details of major events are often fuzzy. Sometimes a familiar scent will draw our thoughts back to the past. The pictures that adorn our walls bring those memories into the present and we re-live those moments in our minds. I love seeing alerts on my phone that bring up pictures from years ago, and instantly I go back to those days. Memories are this little version of time travelling, allowing us to reverse the calendar and visit moments that mean something to us.

Today we celebrate those people who have been part of our lives—passed on, but not forgotten. We pause to thank them for what they've meant to us and take those memories of them with us into the future.

John Wesley loved this day and the practice of remembering the saints in our lives. There was a very distinct difference to him in venerating and praying to the saints of the Catholic church, and celebrating the everyday saints in our

lives. A day to remember the people that made a difference in his own faith journey. I think part of that was because he identified that their journeys, their stories, were also part of his story. Part of our stories today. All Saints' Day remembrances aren't about saints in the Catholic sense. Rather, they are about the everyday people in the past and present who have impacted us and the world around us. All of us are wrapped up in this one big story of God's love for humanity. *This is what the Communion of the Saints line is about when we say the Apostles' Creed.*

**I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.**

One United Methodist article I read says, when we come to the observance of All Saints Sunday, when we talk most about "the communion of saints," the early church and the Apostles' Creed in particular remind us that what we are really talking about is the community or communion of all Christians we know and interact with most deeply, those of our own local church.

And it's true, we need to remember and recall the stories of everyday people like you and me from the past. People who have exemplified the Christian ideals of faithfulness, steadfastness, service, and love. Because we are all wrapped up in this body of believers. This *great cloud of witnesses*, as it's stated in the book of Hebrews, is always all around us, supporting us, cheering us on.

In Hebrews 11 and 12, the author spends a section describing some of the heroes of the Bible. They are lifted up as examples because of their faith. Their hope and firm belief in the future promises of God were foundational to later generations. We read about Noah, Abraham, and Sarah, and their belief in something better in the future, even if they couldn't see it with their own eyes. The Message translation says that their eyes, their hearts, were drawn into making heaven on earth.

Each one of these people of faith died not yet having in hand what was promised, but still believing. How did they do it? They saw it way off in the distance, waved their greeting, and accepted the fact that they were transients in this world. People who live this way make it plain that they are looking for their true home. If they were homesick for the old country, they could have gone back any time they wanted. But they were after a far better country than that—heaven country.

- Hebrews 11:13-16 MSG

And by faith, other characters reach into the future, touching later generations. Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab. The author states he could go on and on with even more examples from the Old Testament, but concludes:

Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours. Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed.

- Hebrews 11:39-40, 12:1-3 MSG

I like to think about how all of these heroes of the faith, except for Jesus, were normal folks just like us. And their stories are worth retelling and remembering because we are all part of the same story. And even today, we celebrate that this great cloud of witnesses is made up of people in these

pews and people around the world we will never know. A collection of saints made up of sinners, just like me and you.

I think we all would tend to get a bit bashful if someone referred to us as saints. I get it. That description carries a lot of weight or burden. But in the Wesleyan sense of the word *saints*, I find it helpful to just picture those people who have inspired us. The people in our faith journeys who have encouraged us. The people who have worked to bring heaven to earth through their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. Even the people who might not have been so sure about God, but they gave of themselves to love us and help us become who we're becoming.

It doesn't mean these saints were, or are, perfect. It doesn't mean they necessarily did anything extraordinary. They were ordinary lives lived with extraordinary faithfulness. And that alone is the reason we look to them as inspiration for our own spiritual journeys. That alone is a reason to stop and remember and be thankful. All Saints' Sunday isn't something we have to do. It's something we get to do. But thanking God for the people who have meant so much to us is a must. As Paul says in Thessalonians 2:

You need to know, friends, that thanking God over and over for you is not only a pleasure; it's a must. We have to do it. Your faith is growing phenomenally; your love for each other is increasing wonderfully. Why, it's only right that we give thanks. We're so proud of you; you're so steady and determined in your faith despite all the hard times that have broadsided you. We tell everyone we meet in the churches all about you.

- 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4 MSG

You still might be thinking there's no way you could be considered as part of the communion of the saints. But in this short passage, Paul gives us a simple definition of a saint. It is someone whose faith is growing and someone whose love for other people is increasing. That's it. Those are the

qualifications in Pauline terms. And the fact that you are here today is proof, I hope, that you are attending to your spiritual growth. And, I hope, by the songs, prayers, words, and communion meal we share today, that your appetite to love others is increasing as well. Great work! Look at you go!

So I have three questions for you: (1) Who are you thankful for today? (2) Who will remember you and be thankful? And (3) are you a product of your environment or is your environment a product of you?

First, do a little time traveling this week. Search your memories for those people in your past, ordinary people, who made a difference in your life. I hope the names that bubble up give you some happy memories to relive. More than that, though, I hope it refreshes your legs to continue running this race of faith. I hope it reminds you of your destination—heaven country. And in the running, other people will see what you do, hear what you say, and be thankful for the difference you are making in their lives.

Now to that final question: are you a product of your environment or is your environment a product of you? I kind of tipped my hand earlier, but I think I'm first a product of my environment. I have been shaped and formed by the people who poured into me as a child, teenager, and young adult. My faith and spiritual journey waxed and waned. It was full of energy some days, and others it was running on empty. But as all those people poured into me and encouraged me, I began to find a theology and faith that was healthy and life-giving. And when that happened, I realized there were more opportunities to shape and encourage others in their own journeys. I found ways to make a positive impact on my environment.

This church is full of saints. Some are busy being formed, while others are helping people find their sea legs, and still others have departed. I was reminded of that this week.

I received a phone call on Monday from a gentleman about giving a gift to the church in memory of Nancy Woolford. He expressed how Shep and Nancy

meant so much to his faith journey as a young adult. He had Shep as a teacher at Hillcrest, and became connected and influenced by Shep and Nancy during his formative years. He never once mentioned any incredible story or one single dramatic event. Instead, he just mentioned how generous and kind, faithful and fervent, the Woolfords were. They were ordinary people living with extraordinary faith. Regular people like you and me. Saints of this church. Saints of the Church universal. And I'm convinced that there were other saints on Shep and Nancy's journey that influenced them as well. People who helped them along the way, encouraged them.

So today we stop and remember the people like the Woolfords, regular people who have made a difference in our lives and have passed on. We savor those memories and celebrate their legacies. At the same time, we recall memories of the people still with us that are, even now, shaping who we are today. Helping us to grow in our faith and love for people, so that we too may be part of someone else's memory in the years to come.