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All Saints' Day

The Christian church around the world holds different understandings of what makes a saint.

Some faith traditions maintain a saint is someone who has lived a perfect life, think of Mother Theresa, for example.

Some faith traditions maintain a saint is someone who has experienced some sort of supernatural or mystical encounter, like seeing visions or receiving stigmata (the mysterious appearance in the hands identical to those Christ suffered when he was nailed to the cross), think of Hildegard von Bingen or Catherine of Siena.

Some faith traditions maintain a saint is someone who possesses extraordinary spiritual gifts or some mysterious way of connecting with the natural world, think Saint Francis and his connection with animals or Saint Patrick and the legendary way he drove the snakes out of Ireland.

Some faith traditions maintain a saint is someone who died in service to God, either by being boiled in oil, drawn and quartered, burned at the stake, thrown to the lions or any other number of means of martyrdom.

Other faith traditions, like our Lutheran tradition, maintain that any person baptized into the triune name of God—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is a saint, simply by virtue of being baptized...no other special qualifications required...no spiritual trance, no mystical visions, no supernatural gifts, no sacrificial life of martyrdom, no deprived life of monasticism, no special rank or title or position...just baptism, the great religious equalizer, making the emperor just as much a saint as the beggar sitting at the foot of his table, making the prostitute just as much a saint as Jesus' own mother Mary, making Judas just as much a saint as James or John or Peter or Paul...making you and me the same...all of us saints, children of God, inheritors of his kingdom of heaven.

...we believe that baptism raises up the lowly and brings low the uppity...which is exactly what Isaiah prophesied so long ago...the valleys will be raised up and every mountain will be made low (meaning that the will of God is to raise up the valleys of the despairing human soul and to bring down the arrogant and evil)...which is what Mary sang when she realized she was pregnant with the Son of God (that God has brought down kings from their thrones and lifted up the humble of heart)...king and peasant, president and prisoner, male and female, all the same in the eyes of God...

...we call this the *communion of saints* (the *communion sanctorum*), which we celebrate today, on this All Saints Day...a day when we don't celebrate others who are better than we are or others who are perfect while we are not or to try to model after those who are braver or smarter or richer or somehow more spiritual than we are...no, it is a day to celebrate the who motley bunch of saints, just as we are, the baptized children of God...this ragtag bunch of broken people, including the living, the dead, and the unborn...

...it is a day to celebrate the great-grandmother you never knew, the one who passed on her blue eyes and stubborn disposition to you...or the great-great uncle you never knew who passed on his broad shoulders and solid work ethic to you...or my great-great-grandchildren whom I will never meet, who will hopefully inherit my

embarrassing tendency to cry at Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 and my fascination for this crazy thing we call church.

And I love this crazy thing called church, this motely bunch of people God deigns to call his children, this collection of people, living, dead and unborn, who have nothing else in common save for the fact that they are loved by the same God.

It's an especially beautiful thing today to have a double baptism on this All Saints Day, and as I was reflecting on that significance, I first thought *how appropriate, to have the bookends of life celebrated in a single service—life and death*. But then I reconsidered...is that really how we Christians think of life and time? Do we live in a single line, marching forward like little soldiers from the cradle to the grave, as the song goes? Or, is it instead a series of births?

If you look up a saint, in an encyclopedia or online or if you notice how they are commemorated during the Christian liturgical year, you will discover they are not celebrated on the anniversaries of their birthdays, but rather on the day they died. This is because we don't believe death is the end of the line...when you are buried in a box and that's it.

No, we believe that death is a second birth. Our first birth is our birth into earth, where we here today find ourselves...trying our best to work through the mess and muddle and confusion and pain of life...but then comes death, our second birth, our birth into heaven, birth into eternal life, free of the mess and muddle and confusion and pain that we know all too well. There is no need to be afraid of death, for it is not the end of anything, but rather, just the beginning of everything.