

Unlimited Potential

As children of God we all have unlimited potential. In the kingdom of God the world is not divided into the have and have not's because every man, woman, and child on this earth are all heirs to God's Abundant Life and the blessings found therein.

As a perfect witness to that fact, today we celebrate All Saints Day. This is day when we remember that we celebrate and worship God not only with those gathered in our presence, but with all who have come before us and all who will follow after us.

Now the popular notion of sainthood can be confusing and even superstitious. I remember that as the mortgage crisis was unfolding in Palm Springs we actually had people coming into the church office asking if we sold St. Joseph statues because they wanted to bury them in their yards so that their houses would sell faster.

And I heard on CNN that some of the largest beneficiaries of this on-going mortgage crisis are in fact the number of small businesses that manufacture and sell these St. Joseph statuettes. I wonder how Joseph feels to be the saint of speedy house sales?

And we can giggle at such things of course, but none of us are immune from a little magical thinking. In desperate or difficult times we have all hoped for easy answers in one way or another.

And of course, we have this other image of Sainthood that only the holiest among the human race can attain to. These are the greats that have been canonized and memorialized as those who could perform miracles, and do extraordinary things in God's name. There is value in celebrating their inspiration to be sure.

But today is the day we can take the superstition and the notion of miraculous greatness out of the equation and celebrate the glorious fact that in the kingdom of God we are ALL saints and we are all heirs of hope and faith.

Stunning to think about isn't it? To really take a minute and ponder what it means to belong to the communion of saints.

A friend of mine was talking about her first experience of really thinking about the meaning of All Saints Day and she recalled a wonderful image from her childhood. She spoke of the semicircular alter rail at her childhood church that was meant as a reminder that as they came to celebrate communion ---those who had come before and those who would follow after were the ones who completed the circle.

This is similar to that same image from John's glorious Revelation, where he has a poetic vision of worship in heaven:

"After this I, John, looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."
What a vivid and wonderful image of joy and worship and today we celebrate that through the mystery of God we too are gathered around that throne.

Some speak of All Saints as a great family reunion, a time when we remember that we stand shoulder to shoulder with saints known and unknown and share in "holy things" like breaking the bread and drinking the wine. A time to rejoice that we are in fact blood relations with the martyrs and greats because as children of God, we believe that Christ's blood runs through all of our veins.¹

But there is also another deeply powerful concept that grows from this. This is the notion that as children of God, we have inherited a faith strong enough, versatile enough, and deep enough to shape our lives and direct our decisions.

This is the idea that we are part of a family so rich and so compelling that even death cannot break the bonds that connect us to one another and to all whom we love but see no longer.

And if even death has no power over us, then the challenges and disappointments that confront us in this life stand no chance at all!

This has been particularly comforting to me this week as I've immersed myself in this great communion. The world is full of tension and distress right now and it is hard to escape it. Stress over the financial state of our lives, stress over an increasingly unsettled society; we live in a time where there is a lot at stake for many people.

In times like these we can feel very lost and alone. I'll confess that as a single person far from family and old friends I can be particularly vulnerable to feeling isolated and alone in the midst of troubled times.

But this celebration, this time of remembering that we are so deeply connected to one another in this vast continuum of God's family, brings great joy and blessings. Who can feel truly alone for long in the midst of such a throng?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor

As Joan Chittister says, "Belief in the communion of saints is a call to immersion in the holy-making project of living out of the life of Christ as so many have done before us." It is also about leaving a legacy of hope and faith to those who follow.

Because we are saints, because each and every one of us matters, we have been given the demanding gift of purpose. What a magnificent gift to have. To know that no matter what our station or situation in life, by virtue of God's love for us, we can all make a difference in this world.²

Because of this there is no societal uproar, no financial crisis, or any painful divisions that can rob us of our blessings and potential. As children of God in a family that includes every tribe and nation and saints both dead and alive, we have the power to be a community of deep welcome and exuberant hope.

We can be a family of faith that offers hope and belonging to others in these increasingly challenging times; we can call others in to our fellowship so that there are even more of us to go out into our community and care for the most vulnerable among us.

We may live in a city that finds Christianity irrelevant, but if we choose to become the very embodiment Christ's message of hope and love for neighbor and one another, well then we have unlimited potential!

As children of God we know that God's blessings are overflowing and cannot be shaken by any ill will wind that blows. As people of deep generosity we can be a community that is a blessing to others.

In two weeks, on November 20th, we will be observing another great event in the life of this family. We will be observing "Celebration Sunday." This is the day we will celebrate the ingathering of our pledged offerings the mission and communal life of our parish. This is the occasion where we joyously claim our participation in God's never ending stream of generosity and hope for all.

Our pledges will give us the ability to accomplish many things. We can grow our life of faith within these walls with prayer, worship, study and fellowship.

And we can in turn continue to identify those neighbors and places of need where we can truly make a difference by joining in solidarity with those whose lives have not provided for the comforts we usually take for granted.

The stronger we are as a family of faith the more closely we can begin to let go of our fears and be agents of transformation from within and without.

Times are tough; this is a truth that cannot be disputed. But we also have the benefit of another even greater truth: As family members in the communion of saints we are blessed beyond imagining.

We have the ability to make the world a place that more closely resembles God's intention for it. *And*, we can make God's blessings a reality not only for one another but for a world that sometimes forgets such a thing as blessing and hope even exists anymore.

We are loved by God with a love that is all consuming. When we surrender ourselves to God's love and release our fears the challenges of this world have no power to place boundaries on our generosity or abilities. We are all created in the image of God and because of that we can change the world.

So no matter what the recent speed-bumps in the road of our parish life---or any of the outside forces that tries to place limits on our potential, we will not only persevere, we will triumph---we are members of the Communion of Saints, we are beloved children of God. We are St. Stephen's.

When we claim this mighty truth, there is no room for fear, no time for regret; there is only unlimited potential. Let's lay claim on the rich inheritance that is ours as those who share in the Abundant Life of Christ.

Then let's go out and spend this wealth---let's spend it lavishly on the world and remind those who may have forgotten that they are also beloved and blessed members of God's family! Amen.

The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Seattle
www.ststephens-seattle.org

² Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief*