

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 5, 2017
All Saints/All Souls Sunday
Rev. Brook Thelander

Nehemiah 9:7-14
Psalm 149
Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17
Matthew 5:1-12

As we gather today to remember those who've gone before us and who now are part of the Church triumphant, I want to share an ancient sermon by St. Bernard.

Some of you may know or recognize this great man of God by the name of a new monastery he was asked to lead in the early twelfth century – Clairvaux. Starting with twelve men, including his own brothers, Bernard led the monastery as its Abbott, which grew to over 130 monks.

Bernard was an amazing, spirit-filled man. One historian has said that he “carried the twelfth century on his shoulders.” He was a gifted communicator, and had a remarkable ability to bring schismatic and disputing parties in the Church together and to effect reconciliation. He served as council to numerous popes and bishops, and under his leadership 68 additional monasteries were started by brothers who had been with him at Clairvaux.

He is recognized as one of the Doctors of the Church, and many of his writings still remain influential. He is also the author of the Hymn, “Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts.”

I believe that this brief sermon from St. Bernard can inspire us, but before I share it, I need to address one part of it that some may not be used to.

St. Bernard sees the saints in heaven not only as great *examples* to us, but also as *intercessors* for us.

Think of it this way. Each week here at Epworth we profess our faith by reciting the Creed, which is not merely our own personal belief, but the belief of the Church through the centuries. And each week, we say, “I believe in the communion of saints.”

Communion with another, or with others, involves *relationship*, and no relationship is possible *without some basis of communication*.

St. Bernard reflects the belief of the Church through history that those who have died in the faith are alive to God, in fact more alive now than ever. There are not two churches, one earthly and one heavenly. God does not segregate his finished, heavenly elite from us ordinary folks who warm our earthly pews. No, the Church is at once heavenly and earthly, and the saints form what the writer to the Hebrews describes as “the great cloud of witnesses” who even now surround us on our journey of faith.

But I want to share St. Bernard's sermon primarily because of how it may inspire us on this day. St. Bernard says:

“Why should our praise and celebration of this feast day mean anything to the saints? What do they care about earthly honors when their heavenly Father honors them by fulfilling the faithful promise of the Son? What does our commemoration mean to them?

The saints have no need of honor from us; neither does our devotion add the slightest thing to what is theirs. Clearly, if we venerate their memory, it serves *us*, not *them*. **But I tell you, when I think of them, I feel myself inflamed by a tremendous yearning.**

Calling the saints to mind arouses in us *above all else a longing to enjoy their company, so desirable in itself*. We long to share in the citizenship of heaven, to dwell with the spirits of the blessed, to join the assembly of patriarchs, the ranks of the prophets, the council of apostles, the great host of martyrs, the noble company of confessors and the choir of virgins. *In short, we long to be united in happiness with all the saints.*

But our [attitudes often do not reflect this]. The Church of all the first followers of Christ awaits us, *but we do nothing about it*. The saints want us to be

with them, and we are indifferent. The souls of the just await us, and we ignore them.

Come, brothers and sisters, let us at length spur ourselves on. We must rise again with Christ, *we must seek the world which is above and set our mind on the things of heaven*. Let us long for those who are longing for us, hasten to those who are waiting for us, and ask those who look for our coming to intercede for us.

We should not only want to be with the saints, *we should also hope to possess their happiness*. While we desire to be in their company, we must also earnestly seek to share in their glory. Do not imagine that there is anything harmful in such an ambition as this. There is no danger in setting our hearts on such glory.

When we commemorate the saints we are inflamed with another yearning: **that Christ our life may also appear to us as he appeared to them and that we may one day share in *his* glory**. Until then we see him, not as he is, but as he became for our sake. He is our head, crowned not with glory, but with the thorns of our sins. As members of that head, crowned with thorns, we should be ashamed to live in luxury. His purple robes are a mockery rather than an honor.

When Christ comes again, [though], his death shall no longer be proclaimed, and we shall know that we also have died, and that our life is hidden with him.

The glorious head of the Church will appear and his glorified members will shine

in splendor with him, when he forms this lowly body anew into such glory as belongs to himself, its head.

Therefore, we should aim at attaining this glory with a wholehearted and prudent desire. That we may rightly hope and strive for such blessedness, we must above all seek the prayers of the saints. Thus, what is beyond our own powers to obtain will be granted through their intercession.”

I was struck by St. Bernard’s point that our thinking about those who’ve gone before us should produce a zealous desire in our hearts to join them, and to be with them and to be with Christ in all of his glory. In some small way, I hope that all we do and say here in this service will do just that.

As we come to the Table this morning, come with gratitude for those who’ve gone before us. And pray for the grace to live as faithfully, and love as deeply, as they did during their earthly journey.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.