

## THEY R US

Formed in Christ: Where have we come from?

*1 John 3:1-3; Revelation 7:9-17*

There is a beautiful irony in today's worship service.

Here at Park View we have fully and joyfully embraced  
the annual observance of All Saints Day.

It was a first for me, when I came here as pastor over 15 years ago.

I soon learned that this service was a treasured tradition.

Some folks made it a point,  
*never* to be out of town on All Saints Day.

The irony, is that we Mennonites started out in Europe  
completely *rejecting* the whole system of beliefs and practices  
that gave rise to All Saint's Day.

One of the official charges against Anabaptist martyr Michael Sattler,  
was that Anabaptists "condemned the mother of God and the saints."

That charge was overstated.

Michael defended himself and the Anabaptists, saying,

"*We don't* condemn the saints.

We just say that we who *live* and *believe* are the saints . . .  
and those who have died in faith we regard as blessed."

Painted icons of saints adorned the walls of cathedrals all over Europe.

Early reformers considered these icons idolatrous.

In 1524, Swiss Reformers, including the first Anabaptists,

like Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel, and such,

went through the Grossmünster church in Zurich,

and had the icons burned,

and paintings of saints scrubbed off the walls.

When Irene and I visited the Grossmünster church a few years ago,

we could still see evidence on the walls 500 years later—

paint stains in the shape of a saint,

that couldn't quite be completely scrubbed.

There's also irony in the fact that you can financially support

the work of the Mennonite Historical Committee

by purchasing icons of early Anabaptists

painted in the same style

as those once ripped from the walls of the Grossmünster.

There's all kinds of beautiful irony  
that a service like this brings to mind.

I call it beautiful irony,

because by now we have begun to make peace with our past,  
we've come to embrace beauty on *both* sides of that conflict.

The Anabaptists had noble motives,

even if their zeal went a little overboard.

There *were* religious abuses that had to be addressed.

At the *same* time, we have begun to recover some of the good

in the old tradition of honoring the blessed ones

who once lived among us,

and are now part of the great cloud of witnesses.

Now there is still some danger imbedded in this tradition.

We try to walk a faithful middle ground,

but there is danger on both sides.

On *one* side, is practically worshipping saints,

letting them pray for us,

misplacing devotion that should be reserved for God.

On the *other* side,

is destroying religious art,

and desecrating images of persons we ought to honor,

and thereby preventing their lives from inspiring and blessing us.

I think the way we celebrate All Saints Day at Park View,

has found the right balance.

But we still need to be attentive to the danger.

Take Revelation 7 for instance, which was just read.

John paints a fantastic scene in heaven.

A scene far removed from anything we know in this life.

Multitudes, robed in white, standing before the throne of God,

waving branches, shouting praises.

There's a host of angels and elders and "four living creatures,"—

which John described earlier as being

full of eyes, in front and behind,

having six wings,  
one creature looking like a lion, another like an ox,  
one like a human, and the fourth like an eagle,  
and all are holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense.  
This is not your ordinary, back-yard kind of moment.  
This is an other-worldly vision.

Which demonstrates one of the dangers.

This multitude robed in white, are the saints—  
the ones who have gone before.

V. 13 says, “These are they  
who have come out of the great ordeal;  
they have washed their robes  
and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

*These are they.*

In other words, “they are *your* people.”

These words in Revelation were written  
during a time of horrible persecution in the church.  
Christians were being killed in huge numbers.

They just disappeared from the life of the church.  
But here John the Revelator brings the church a vision,  
to show where they are *now*.

It’s an encouraging vision for the persecuted church,  
but it presents a danger.

They might make the martyrs into some sacred angelic beings  
so holy, so far removed from their earthly reality,  
that they can’t identify with them.

The legends will grow.

And with each retelling of the story of their lives,  
the lives of these saints will become  
more removed, more mysterious,  
more magical, more untouchable.

We’ve seen that happen.

That’s part of what 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformers were trying to correct.  
Saints are *not* super-human.

*They R Us.*

They are heroes, yes. And heroes are good.

Heroes can inspire us. Can push us to do more and be more.  
But we *dare* not make them larger than life.

Especially in this celebrity-driven popular culture.  
There’s a fine line between admiring someone,  
and worshipping them.

We even do that with our children.

We tell them over and over that they are special.  
And if we’re not *careful*,  
we soon have them convinced,  
that they are *not like* everyone else.

Well, *okay*, I’ll grant we can call children “special,”  
if what we mean is that their personhood is unique,  
that they are precious,  
that they have infinite worth, and value,  
no matter who they are or what happens to them.

But in another very *real* way,

*none* of us in this room are special—  
*including* those whose pictures are on the table.  
We are *all*, *everyone* of us,  
made from the same mold.

We are all human beings created from the same pattern.  
And that pattern is the image of God.  
We all have it.

And we have it equally.  
Regardless of race, gender, tribe, or social status.

We are *not* special, but we have infinite worth.

We are precious in God’s eyes.

We are all children of God,  
whose ultimate worth is always and *only* in God’s hands.  
As the apostle said in today’s reading from 1 John 3,  
“We are God’s children now;  
what we will be has not yet been revealed.”

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God has *never* created a saint . . . *or* an evildoer.

When God brought Mother Theresa into the world . . .  
and when God brought Adolf Hitler into the world . . .  
they *both* began with the same image of God  
stamped on their beings.  
I believe they were both loved, and of infinite value to God.

But they *dealt* with that image of God in very different ways.  
One embraced the image in herself,  
and saw the same image in the poorest of the poor.  
The other saw himself as someone special,  
with extraordinary privilege and power from God,  
to decide whether other human beings  
were worthy to live, or *not*.

One of them saw the need for God's grace in their lives,  
and *accepted* that grace.  
The other one *didn't*.

When we celebrate All Saints Day at Park View,  
we *reject* the notion that the saints we honor,  
are fundamentally different from *any* of us.  
We honor them, precisely *because* they are just like us.  
They are our friends, our neighbors, our fellow church members,  
who lived by the grace of God.  
*They R Us.*

We honor them and remember them  
for how they have formed our lives.  
My Christian formation did not *start*  
on the day I surrendered my life to Christ,  
and began to actively seek to grow in Christ.  
It began long before I was *born*.  
The line of people from whom I came—  
both the saints and the scoundrels—  
are the beginning and the foundation  
of my being formed in Christ.

Some of them taught me by example.  
They walked with God, and it showed.

If I knew them personally, then I gained from them directly.  
But in *most* cases, what I gained was indirect.  
It passed down to me through multiple generations.

*And*, no doubt, I was also formed, and am still *being* formed,  
by those who carried deep wounds in their lives,  
and lived out of that woundedness,  
in ways I may never fully realize.  
Healing is *possible* from those wounds, and their continuing effects.  
But the need for healing  
is *part* of what we inherit from past generations,  
it's part of what forms us.

I imagine that in the list of names we recited a few minutes ago,  
in *some* cases,  
those names conjured up vivid and painful memories  
for some of us here who are their descendants,  
or were otherwise impacted by their woundedness.

But whether they were saints or scoundrels,  
or some odd combination of the two,  
*they R us.*  
We did *not* start from scratch.  
We are deeply, and forever, connected to those persons.  
The story of our formation in Christ  
will *always* be incomplete,  
if we don't *somehow*, give an account  
of how we have been formed by those we have come from.

That's why we do All Saints Day here at Park View.  
We call to mind those who have gone before.  
Not to worship them.  
And certainly not to vilify them.  
We call them consciously to mind,  
we name them aloud,  
to honor them,  
and to celebrate the grace of God active in their lives,  
*even* if that grace was never fully realized.

We *don't* make them special.  
We *don't* imagine they are more holy than we are.  
But we honor their memory,  
and allow their lives to touch ours once more.

May they continue to form us  
as we submit ourselves to a life lived in Christ.

Of course, there are a multitude of others in this cloud of witnesses,  
saintly and otherwise,  
who many of us are thinking of today,  
who were *not* named aloud,  
because they were not connected to Park View  
at the time of their death.

On this day, we also make space to remember *them*,  
and honor their memory,  
through the lighting of candles.

Again, not to worship them,  
or make them into persons they were *not*,  
but to honor the grace of God at work in their lives.

So for the next few minutes we invite you to come up,  
whenever you wish,  
adults, youth, children,  
and light a candle, prayerfully remembering  
those you are connected to,  
who helped to form who you are today.

—*Phil Kniss, November 6, 2011*