

GO, SAINTS!

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. I always like this celebration because it spreads joy. I especially appreciate our opening hymn, "I sing a song of the saints of God." It conjures pleasant thoughts of nice people just living their lives in various occupations. No great heroics are being called for. I began to think, that doesn't sound so hard, even I might be able to qualify. But then I get caught up with that story of the one saint who had the unfortunate encounter with a fierce wild beast...! There may be some bumps in the road, it seems.

In fact, these days we have many fierce wild beasts to beware of. In our reading from the Old Testament today, we learn that Daniel dreamed of four great beasts emerging from the stormy sea. Then he learned that these beasts represented four kings arising from the earth. He doesn't learn the characters of these kings, but from the context I believe their rules were not benevolent! From the tale at hand, I believe it is telling us that the great beasts we most fear today are not the four-legged kind, but the two-legged. Our world is saturated with these fierce beasts who threaten our would-be saints. Every day we learn of murders, robberies, thefts, rapes, home break-ins, mass shootings of school children, and endless other crimes. On a larger scale we encounter politicians and persons in authority who attack and lie to each other, and who have no appreciation of discussion or compromise. We have those who use military might to force their will on others. We have some who continue to escalate their attacks without regard to consequences, where one false move could initiate a nuclear holocaust. Currently on TV we seem to have a plethora of excellent documentaries on the horrors of World Wars I and II, and the unspeakable atrocities inflicted by the Nazis. We would-be saints must always be aware of these forces, and try to encourage Christian behavior where we can. AND we must realize that there are costs to being a saint – some less, some more, as happened to that saint who encountered the fierce wild beast.

One necessary requirement for peace is for each peaceable country to maintain armed forces sufficient to help discourage belligerent actions by others. The United States does maintain such forces. On Veterans Day we honor the many individuals who have served in the military over the years. This celebration, formerly called Armistice Day, will be held on November 11, the date the armistice to end World War I was signed between Germany and France. I have the greatest respect for our veterans (not because I was one). Many of them were wounded or killed in service to our country. A few weeks ago we were honored to hear from John Dermody on his experiences responding to the 9/11 attacks. I have to stop and think from time to time in order to realize that I am also a veteran. But I had no harrowing experiences. I served 3 years in the Navy. at two bases (Adak, in the Aleutian Islands, and Las Vegas), each a positive experience.

One of the more prosaic costs of being a saint is helping fellow saints join together to determine and to carry out Jesus' assignments for us. To that end we find we need a physical space in which to meet, and paid leaders to guide and instruct us. And we then form congregations. And we discover we need money to keep our congregations running. This may come from several sources, but primarily we expect each member to give some funds to this cause. And now we come to the sticky issue: how much should each member give.

And – ah ha! Maybe you thought you'd avoid hearing from me this year on the subject of... STEWARDSHIP! Sorry – if you put me on a podium in the Fall, this is what you get! If you're an old timer who has heard this message repeated every year for the last umpteen, you can... no, not dose off! But rather, show newcomers an example of how you give!

The first lesson in true stewardship that Judy and I encountered was at our church in Baytown, Texas. We'd moved there where I accepted a job at the Exxon refinery and chemical plant. After a couple of years our beloved rector of 20 years or so retired. He was replaced by a young and energetic priest named Randolph Cooper, for whom we were his second church after seminary. He came with his wife and child.

About stewardship, he said, "Don't be too concerned about the needs of this church. This church does not need your money! God does not need your money!" (There followed a large gasp, then by "Say WHAT?!") He continued: God is working his purposes out, as year succeeds to year. If this church falters or closes, God will still work his purposes out, perhaps through some other group of people. But God most wants his people here to give faithfully. And with money faithfully given, God can work marvelous things!

Randolph suggested that each family work out their stewardship plan based on some percentage of the gifts they had been given. And then work to give at that level, if not immediately. The only giving level mentioned in the Bible is a tithe, or 10%. For this reason it is used by some people as a personal goal, but there is nothing magical about it. The goal is purely personal, known only to oneself and God.

Moving to the present day, for these reasons, Messiah has not asked members to pledge to a budget. The Vestry does not prepare any proposed budget for the coming year, until all pledges have actually been received. The Vestry promises the congregation that we will live with whatever pledges our members submit, even if it means cutting back on programs. So far this has provided a very good response.

Although Judy and I had struggled for some time with a tight budget, we did adopt the tithe as a personal goal. Our method to achieve this was to dedicate 15% of each salary increase into our church pledge. Fortunately this plan was favored by the fact that pay increases were fairly frequent in those years. After several years we reached the 10% level, and have continued ever since. It no longer is bothersome – just another category of our expenses. Try it, you'll like it!

I attended an Episcopal high school in New Orleans, and our school teams nickname was the Saints. So I'll say to you now what we said to our teams then: GO, SAINTS, GO!

Hardee Kilgore
11/6/22

