

November 5, 2017  
All Saints' Day Observed  
Rev. 7:9-17; I John 3:1-3; Matt. 5:1-12

## Saints at Work and Saints at Rest

Today we observe the Festival of All Saints. We do this by attending to God's Word in scripture and by breaking bread together at the Table of the host "whose hands are wounded, who will open wide our eyes."<sup>1</sup> We do this as the Apostle Paul directs, "**with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with [our hearts] to the Lord.**"<sup>2</sup> And we observe this festival by recalling the saints who have gone before us, showing us the way.

The word "saint" means "holy one," and according to the Reformed Tradition, that appellation should not be limited to those on the official list approved by popes. Instead, saints are sinners who are called to be holy.

In other words, the church doesn't make saints. God does.

Saints come in all shapes and sizes, and from all walks of life. As the hymn says,

*You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,  
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea.*<sup>3</sup>

You don't have to be dead to be a saint. In fact, this sanctuary is full of saints right now, for each of us has been called to be holy, and together, we are the saints of God.

Now, you might be thinking, "Well, it's possible I'm a saint, but I'm not so sure about the person sitting next to me." You're not the first Christian to think that. The church has always struggled in this way. If you don't believe me, read your Bible.

Another word for "saint" is "child of God." That's the term preferred by the writer we call John.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, "Look Who Gathers at Christ's Table," No. 506 in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 5:9

<sup>3</sup> Lesbia Scott, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," No. 730 in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*.

**See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.**

When have you heard those words before? You're right! It was right there, at that baptismal font, when I held up the newest member of this family of faith -- still dripping -- and you said, "Amen! Welcome!"

That's what saints do -- they claim their identity as children of God, and then set about the lifelong task of living out their sainthood together.

It's hard and messy work, this task of living into God's call, and this congregation has been at it for 185 years. Sometimes we get it right, and often we don't. As we recall the saints who have gone before, pride and modesty should go hand in hand.

When this congregation was organized back in 1832, churches didn't write mission statements. If they had, one of the mission goals would have been to introduce an element of order and -- shall we say -- *refinement* to the tiny frontier town called Tallahassee. However, not everyone agreed on how to accomplish this.

Amos Savage was the first pastor of this congregation. He was not the installed pastor; he was sent by the Home Mission Board to function as the pastor until the congregation gained a bit of maturity. He arrived in November of 1832, just a few months after the congregation had been organized. After being in Tallahassee for two months, he wrote to the Mission Board,

"Many of the people here are enlightened, intelligent, and enterprising. They are from all the states of the Union."<sup>4</sup>

However, Mr. Savage goes on, "Sabbath-breaking, profanity, intemperance, horse-racing, gambling, dancing, etc. are open and unblushing."

The Rev. Mr. Savage set about remedying this situation by increasing Sabbath services from one to two, teaching Sabbath school, and delivering two lectures a week. In addition, the fledgling congregation of 17 members, only ten of which lived in Tallahassee, produced a monthly concert and "prayer meetings occasionally."

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<sup>4</sup> All the references to the early history of First Presbyterian Church taken from Barbara Rhodes wonderful book, *At First: The Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee, Florida, 1828 -1938*, 1994.

All this without a sanctuary. As Mr. Savage explains in his report to the Home Mission Board, “We have no house of worship and no place except a room hired for a court room, occupied half the time by Episcopalians.”

It was hard being a saint in 1833, especially if you’re a Yankee trying to grow a church in the wilds of North Florida. Elisha Perkins, a Ruling Elder in the church, confided in a letter,

Mr. Savage labors steadily and perseveringly – he is a most excellent man. Yet I fear he is not well calculated for this place. His manner is cold and uninteresting in the pulpit, and blunt and unpolished in private intercourse – and in the estimation of Southerners, want of excitement in the pulpit and want of easy politeness out of it – is want of everything. Mr. Savage is disliked by many . . .

In a subsequent public meeting, during which Mr. Savage took a strong stand reproving vice and calling for the establishment of a temperance society, he was met with “violent language” by many in the crowd and silence by most of the members of First Presbyterian Church.

Amos Savage left Tallahassee early in the summer of 1833. He had lasted seven months. It would be five years before the congregation managed to build a sanctuary, due to three factors: the Seminole Indian Wars, yellow fever epidemics, and their inability to keep a pastor for more than a few months at time.

Philo F. Phelps was a young pastor who showed a lot of promise. He was installed in 1841. Saint Philo served for six months before yellow fever took him. His younger brother Joshua Phelps fared better. He came in 1843 and stayed for two whole years.

In fact, for the first 59 years of its life, this congregation couldn’t keep a pastor for more than three years at a time until S. C. Caldwell arrived in 1891. He stayed for six whole years, setting a record.

I tell you all of this not to criticize the saints who have gone before us, but to express thanks that the dynamic between pastor and congregation has, shall we say, improved over time. These days, the pastor must run hard to catch up with this congregation.

Long before its current pastor arrived, the saints of First Church established the first racially inclusive preschool in this city. That was in 1966. In 1979, you opened the doors of this sanctuary to the family of John Spenkelink, the first person to die in Florida's electric chair after the death penalty was reinstated in 1976.

In 1984, a certain pastor (young at the time) was serving a church in Altavista, Virginia. He was working with a group that wanted to start something called Habitat for Humanity in Campbell County, Virginia. As part of his research, he read about how Habitat got started in Tallahassee, Florida. A church down there was celebrating its 150<sup>th</sup> birthday and renovating its historic sanctuary. The saints down there decided that twenty-five cents on every dollar raised in their capital campaign would go to start Habitat.

"Hmm," the young pastor thought "I wonder if God might call me to a church like that." Then he remembered telling the Lord, "I'll go anywhere but Florida."

The winter of 1986 was especially cold. Two Tallahasseeans died of hypothermia that winter. The saints of First Church heard about that, and the following winter, they opened the Education Building to house homeless neighbors on frigid nights. That begat the Cold Nights Shelter, which begat the Shelter of Tallahassee and Leon County, which begat the Kearny Center.

In the life of saints, one way of doing mission leads to another.

And all the while, this pastor struggles to keep up with the congregation.

**"Beloved, writes the apostle, "We are God's children now. What we will be has not yet been revealed . . ."**

Who knows what new directions God's mission might take the saints of First Church? **"What we will be has not yet been revealed."** Whatever that direction might be, we will still be attending to the Word of God. We will still be breaking bread with glad and generous hearts. We will still be seeking justice. We will still be worshipping God **"with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with [our hearts] to the Lord."**

For that is what saints do. And we will keep at it until “the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done.”

Then we will join

Barbara  
Wally  
Dan  
Mary Jane  
Jean  
Mary  
John  
Kent  
Ruth  
Catharine  
Peter, and  
Gail

where, seated at the Table of God’s welcome, we will break the bread of God’s kingdom and rejoice with all the saints who from their labors rest.