Today we celebrate the festival of All Saint’s Day. Remembering. That’s what All Saints Day is all about.

I remember my first All Saints celebration as an ordained person in my first parish. I was the new curate at Emmanuel Church, Rapid City, SD and full of new ideas. One of those was to have an All Saints celebration instead of a Halloween celebration. I’m not a big fan of Halloween. In fact, I’m not a fan at all of Halloween. All Saints used to be called All Hallows and the eve of All Hallows was All Hallows Evening or E’en in older English, thus Hallows e’en or Halloween. While All Saints Day is a celebration of all of the Saints of God, Halloween, the night before, is a festival of Samhain, the Lord of the dead. It’s all about the recognition and honoring of the spirits of the dark side of the force, to use Star Wars language. And I know that lots of people poo poo this and say that it’s just a fun night for pranks and candy, but it’s more than that and so I don’t like it. Having done significant battle with the other side of the spirit world in previous churches, I’m not a fan of freely inviting them in. But I digress. Back to Emmanuel Rapid City.

The rector thought an All Saints party, with focus on the saints and biblical characters would be a good thing so on a night other than Halloween, we had a party with games and food and candy and it was fun and allowed us to really celebrate the saints of God. Several days before this party was to occur, I had a parent approach me about appropriate costuming for the party. The question was, “My sons are dressing up as a cowboy and an Indian for Halloween. Could they wear those to the party also?”

“Tell me what you think,” I said.

“No,” said the mom rather dejectedly. “Probably not.”

I said, “Think again. Do we know any Native Americans who are Christians and therefore saints?”

“Yes! Bishop Harold Jones.”

“OK. Very good.”

(Aside – Bp. Jones, a Lakota Sioux, was the Bishop who later ordained me a priest. He was the first Native American bishop in the Episcopal Church and was elected to be bishop to Navajoland in NM. He later had a stroke, could not continue to serve as a diocesan bishop, retired and returned home to SD. He worshipped regularly at Emmanuel when he was in town.)

Back to the costume conversation. “And do we know any cattle ranchers who are Christian?”

“Yes. Roy Olson.” She said. (Roy was a member of Emmanuel also)

“Well then, I guess your guys can come in the costumes they already have.” I said.

Needless to say, she was pleased. And it allowed for a teachable moment at the party because there were people who came in more biblically based attire or more famous historic saints attire who thought these two boys and their mom were “cheating” or just being lazy and not trying. There was a moment when we got to rehearse the conversation I had with the mom and then discuss it a little further as a group. After that, we got back to the party. It was a great evening and it allowed people there to expand their thinking about what it was to be a saint!

All Souls day, which is November 2nd is the day we remember those saints who have gone on before us or gone home as some like to say. All Saints Day is a day in which we remember all the saints, those who have gone before us, and the ones living in our midst. We remember saints that may be well known as well as those not so well known and those known only to God. Together we are all the communion of saints. The Greek word for saint is hagios, which means holy. The Latin is sanctus from which we derive the word saint. The word holy literally means to “be set apart”, some paraphrase this as “special.” And that is us. We are special to God and set apart for His purposes.

Being set apart for holy purposes is what happens to us through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. We move from being sinners to being saints, that is made holy in, by and through God in Christ. All Saints Day is a reminder for me every year that I need to focus my thinking and my preaching on living as a saint not just repenting as a sinner. There is a great quote from a Jan Karon book entitled “Light From Heaven”, in her Mitford series. It says, “Every saint has a past. Every sinner has a future.” We all have pasts. Every one of us here is guilty of being a sinner. Every one of us has lied, cheated, stolen, or done some kind of wrong. We have in the past and we will. The marvelous thing is, we have been forgiven our past wrongs and will continue to be forgiven our wrongdoings -- which means that we all have a future. God has claimed each of us as His own calls us children of God and given us the title of saint. That is a reality, and we have the future hope that comes with it.

It’s funny to me that when I ask the question, “Who is a saint?” no one ever answers, “Me!” It’s always someone else. It may be someone well known or someone personal who has incredible characteristics of piety or patience or grace. But it’s never, “Me!”

But didn’t we just sing at the beginning of the service that the saints of God are just ordinary people? Doctor, queen (maybe not so ordinary), shepherdess, soldier, priest? People in normal, everyday places who just happen to believe in and follow Jesus. They are the saints, the holy ones of God. Past and present! Me! You!

And so today, we celebrate our sense of community – community found in and with God and each other. We are connected to one another more because of God than we are because of close proximity of living space. This is why we are also in community with or in communion with folks near and far who believe in God as we know Him in Jesus Christ. And being in community gives us living examples to see and follow in living as saints.

So let me ask you – who was an example to you of living a life of faith in Jesus. Who were the saints in your life who pointed you toward Jesus? Look and think beyond mom and dad if that’s who you think of first because you probably think of them often.

I have many. I want to remember a two with you now and hope that you will take some time today to think about yours and to thank God for them.

There’s Tom Andrews. Tom was a senior in high school when I was a freshman in high school. He graduated and went away to Bridgewater College but came back at the end of his first year due to an illness. When he did, he took over the leadership of the Young Life club at Thomas Jefferson High School in Alexandria. Young Life is a non-denominational outreach ministry to high school students founded in order to share the Gospel of Jesus with that age group. There is Young Life in the Warrenton area. Tom was a person who week after week shared from the Scriptures at YL club meetings and pointed to Jesus both in his words and his life. He was a good example to me of what it was to be a servant leader. Tom is now the pastor of a church in the Virginia Beach area and has been involved in ministry since he graduated from high school.

Next, I remember Arnie Jacobs, who was a YL leader in Indianapolis and who was the speaker at a YL weekend at Natural Bridge in the spring of my sophomore year of HS. Arnie spoke of Jesus and sin and forgiveness in such a way that I got it. I understood it. I had to gone to church as a child and been confirmed but I really didn’t get it. Not until I heard Arnie tell the story of sin and redemption. THEN I got it. And I am grateful to Arnie for his gift to me. One year, after sharing this with one of my congregations, I wrote a letter to Arnie to tell him what he had done for me and what I was doing now as a priest. I encourage you to do the same with someone who has made a difference in your life regarding Jesus.

There are many others in my life. Who has it been in your life? Remember them today and thank God for them when we get to the prayers whether silently or aloud. And then live what you believe so that you may be that person to and for others. “For the saints of God are just folk like me and I mean to be one too.” Amen