

Vessel of the Lord
We Are Church

In a couple of days it will be Halloween. For most Americans it is known as the day when children dress in costumes and go door to door to receive treats. "Halloween" actually comes from the term "all hallows eve," meaning the eve of the commemoration of those hallowed (or holy) ones we often call "saints." In Christian tradition this is known as All Saints Day. It is the day Christians remember those believers who have given their lives to witness to their faith in Jesus Christ.¹ It is kind of like the church's memorial day. We are celebrating that day today – remembering the saints who've gone before us.

Some saints died prematurely precisely because they gave testimony to Jesus. We have a word to describe them: "martyr." It comes from the Greek word used in the Bible: *Marturia* - testimony, witness, evidence, reputation (see 1 Tim. 3:7). A witness, or martyr (*Marturoß*), was someone who spoke well of another or spoke in defense of someone. In the case of Christians, it was those who spoke well of Christ, even if they were punished for it.

The majority of saints, however, have given and continue to give testimony to their faith in Christ through a long and peaceful life lived in a godly manner. They are able to live so because they can genuinely say "My life is not my own." (*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies, 1 Cor. 6:19-20*) Each and every day the world is receiving a message from you ... what message are you giving? To yourself? To your family? To your church your family? To your community?

We all hope and pray to have a long, productive, and peaceful life. Yet throughout that life God is calling believers in Christ to grow closer to Him as members of His family. A productive life is living the great and good news of this personal God who knows our brokenness and pain and has come in person to heal us and pour healing through us. *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. 2 Cor. 4:6.*

Who We Are

Two weeks ago I said that in the N. T. the word translated as "church" is the Greek word *ekklesia* (*ekklesia*). It means "gathering" or "assembly" of people. So, who are these people gathering and assembling? Who are we? What's our identity? Many people go through life believing their identity is defined by what they do ... job, career, or how they act out their passions and desires. Some of us define our identity by our preferences and orientations. Some of us allow our family, or boss, or coach, or peer group to define our identity. And some go through life without ever thinking about their identity, they just go through life. What about you?

The astounding news of Christ is that you have an identity that is better and greater than what any of those other markers in life provide. God created each one of us, and loves each one of us as His own, and gives us our true identity. (*For in him we live and move and have our being.' ... 'We are his offspring.'* Acts 17:28.) That doesn't mean He loves whatever we do for God does not define us by what we do, but by who we are becoming. St. Paul reminds us: ... *if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* 2 Cor. 5:17. You are not simply the product of your birth and upbringing, or even the bad choices you may have made. Regardless of your background, you have a Heavenly Father, your true and eternal Father. You are God's own son or daughter. You are not your sin and brokenness. You are God's new creation. Temptation may assail you, but your identity is not found in your temptations.

This new identity not only gives confidence for walking through all that life can throw at us, it also gives us new eyes ... the way we see others and the world around us. This new identity is what draws us together in His church. We are those heading in the right direction to obtain *“the riches of his glorious inheritance of the saints.”* The inheritance is Jesus. We can walk each and every day unafraid with Jesus at our side because God *“has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”* Everything that is over you is already under him. Everything that annoys you, defeats you, tempts you, keeps you from reaching Him, is under his feet. How can we lose? With Jesus we know where we are going and how we are going to get there.

We might ask ourselves: Am I closer to Jesus today than I was last year? Do I trust Him for my future more than I did a few years ago? I mean enough to step out in faith in some area of my life? Am I more like Jesus today than I was this time last year? Am I any more like Jesus than I was ten years ago, five years ago? Does God want it to be that way? God has called you that you may realize the hope of being more like Jesus. The first step is to have a determination to do so. Have you made that determination?

Throughout his letters, St. Paul refers to those in the church as saints. Do you consider yourself a saint? ... You're in good company ... most of those we've identified as saints over the years never considered themselves that either. They were just living in their new identity. Some folks think they have to be a Mother Theresa in order to be saintly. Not true. She's the one who reminded us that we aren't all called to do great things for God, but to do small things with great love. It's a matter of living your new identity in Christ, as a member of God's own family. As you do so, you will slowly (or speedily) be transformed by Holy Spirit power, so that your character and attitudes become more conformed to your heavenly Father's expectations. Perhaps the defining characteristic of a saint is that they realize that their life is not their own.

Where We Belong

Watching a football game last Sunday afternoon I noticed some of the fans ... grown men (and a few women) dressed in team costume, faces painted in team colors... some pretty wild and they were hooting it up! My Face Book page has been inundated with photos of Tongan relatives in New Zealand dressed in red and waving a Tongan flag, as they cheered for their national team in its rugby match with Australia. [Sorry to report: all their enthusiasm didn't help the Tongan team.] It made me think how much people want to belong ... belong to something bigger than themselves. Our identity is made complete in belonging. We know this: “birds of a feather flock together.” The fact is we are not meant to be alone. I believe one of the greatest challenges people face in life is finding where they fit in, where they belong. When we're young we struggle with this a lot, and hopefully “find ourselves” as we mature. But even in later years we may ask ourselves: “Is this where I really belong?” If you come from a broken family it's all the harder. Sure there are plenty of groups that want to call us in ... some of them okay, some more helpful than others, and some downright destructive. I've met many young people who are missing genuine community, a warm family, acceptance, and caring. Oh sure, many are busy, busy, busy ... but the need is still lurking beneath the surface and the bravado.

With our new identity in Christ we find where we truly belong: in God's own family. It's the right family for today and for eternity, this new family Christ has formed. ... *to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God...* John 1:12. We are human beings with different sins but the same Savior who washes us clean from sin. It is this body, the church, that God has created in order to fill us with holiness, to equip us to serve Him, and to reveal Himself to us in deeper ways. *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God ... Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone,* Eph. 2:19.

Last week Darrell talked about being neighbors to those around us. Just like the 72 followers that Jesus sent out to the neighborhoods to make friends and to listen to people, Jesus sends us into our neighborhoods with God's light shining in our hearts. What kind of neighbor are you? Can you and I be a helpful presence for our neighbors, listening to needs and difficulties, or just being a friend? We can

be the vessels of God's care for people where they are and His desire for them to be in His family, the church.

Vessel of Christ

Why church? Because it is Christ's vessel for carrying His healing presence in the world. *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?* 1 Corinthians 3:16. Our identity, as individual believers and as a church, is rooted in the identity of God. Think about it: the identity we ascribe to God, either from our doubt and arrogance or from our faith as attested in Scripture, will determine the identity we recognize in our ourselves and our church, and ultimately the kind of life we will live or the kind of church we will be.

"We are the church" doesn't mean that we meet weekly, or occasionally, or that we cooperate on a project. Jesus meant for us to enter into the communion of the Trinity – the warmth of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Church is supposed to be where disciples of Christ become part of one another. *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others,* Romans 12:4-5. This kind of church goes against the social trend of individualism in which church is experienced as a loosely affiliated group of spiritual persons having simultaneous, individual spiritual experiences. We are adopted into God's family, the body of Christ, so we can't pretend we don't belong to one another. The uncertain and restless teenagers and jaded emerging adults are connected with parents and grandparents of the faith, to be this family together.

More than ever people need family ... healthy family, bound together with caring and warmth and love. It's the love of Jesus Christ who makes us a family. Church is the gathering of saints, those know their lives belong to Christ and so are finding their true lives in Him. This is where Christians belong: in the company of those who are growing in Christ. A coal removed from the fire soon grows cold. And our heritage is huge ... going back two millennia. We're part of a big, big story.

My wife loves to garden. When I look at her tomatoes, peppers, taro, lemon grass, oranges, limes, and even the hibiscus, I can't help but think of the "big story" in gardening terms. Every plant and tree in our yard tells its own unique story in flower, fruit, and leaf, but each of those stories points to the bigger story of the passing of the seasons and of life and regeneration. If I had no understanding of seasons, I might not understand why a tree was turning yellow. I might misinterpret this change to be a sign of disease, rather than an indicator of autumn, knowing that after Winter comes Spring and green leaves.

In the same manner, let's understand the big story we participate in as "saints" – as Paul would call us in the church. The Bible's big story is one of God's creation, humanity's fall from original goodness, God's offer of redemption, and the restoration of all humanity to goodness. The church is part of God's redemption plan and the restoration of His goodness in creation. We are part of God's redemption plan. There are seasons and movements in this big story and we might misinterpret these as dangers, when perhaps God is doing something among us, or around us. (Pruning we know produces greater fruit in its season.) It's essential that we understand the big story of church - not only our local congregation, but also the church worldwide over the millennia. That's where God is working.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, Hebrews 12:1.

Friends, there is more glory in God than we can imagine and more joy in this life than we can hold.

¹Early on in its history the church commemorated the martyrdom of its members on certain days. These were the various saints' days. But soon the calendar was filled with so many saints' days that it was cluttered and confusing. After the Reformation, Protestants went back to the New Testament usage of the term saint to include all Christians, and to commemorate all the deceased saints on one day - All Saints Day.