

Sunday after All Saints' – Year A
St. Stephen's, Orinda

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For All Our Saints

We live surrounded by saints. And, as one of our clergy is fond of putting it, “we stand on the shoulders of giants.” We owe so much to those who have gone before us in faith – the big name saints for sure, but also the lesser known, and even the unknown. Today is a day to remember those saints.

Our parish church is filled with reminders of those saints. I pass one small reminder every day. You have probably passed it too, but it is so small as to be overlooked unless we are very, very observant. As you come up the stairs from the parish hall to this level, you might notice a handle on the ride side wall at the top of those stairs. There is a tiny brass plaque near this small handle. It says simply “For N. Love B.” When I first saw this about seven years ago it was a mystery to me, so I set out to solve the mystery of the handle and of N and B. It took some time, but I finally learned that N is Nell Christie and B is Bret a former sexton, or janitor, at St. Stephen's. It seems Nell had suffered a stroke and found it difficult to get up the last few steps and Bret took it upon himself to put a grab handle at the top of the stairs. Bret, in his own way, was a saint.

I often find myself looking at a very small stained glass piece in my office. It is not particularly beautiful, nor is it profound. And it's not so much the piece itself that draws my attention, but the words around it. They remind me of an old story that I want to tell you.

Brian was a bright, inquisitive five year old. One day, his mom took him to their parish church so she could drop off their pledge card. No, this is not a stewardship sermon – well, maybe it is. Brian and his mom made a brief stop at the church office, and then stopped into the church to pray. It was a beautiful church, filled with magnificent stained glass windows, much like St. Stephen's. Mom knelt and prayed and Brian did, too, for a while, but being a bright and inquisitive five year old, he soon was up and wandering around the church.

When she sensed that Brian was no longer kneeling next to her, his mom watched him walk toward the brilliant shaft of light created by the sun shining through one of those magnificent stained glass windows. Brian began moving his hand slowly through the multi-hued bands of light, staring intently at the colors. His mom walked over to him as he looked up at the windows. “Mom, who are those people in the windows?” he asked. His mom answered, “Those are the saints, Brian.” He pointed at one and asked, “Who is she?” “Why that is Mary, the mother of Jesus,” replied his mom. “And who is that,” he asked. “That is Peter, he was a disciple of Jesus,” she replied. Brian continued to play with the light for a bit, and then, because he was five, he soon said, “OK, we can go now.”

Two or three weeks later, it was All Saints’ Sunday. Brian was in his Sunday School class and the teacher began by saying, “Today we are going to learn about the saints of God.” Brian immediately raised his hand and began waving it wildly about. “I know! I know!” He kept repeating. His teacher really couldn’t ignore this eager little guy, so she asked him, “Brian, what do you know?” He answered, “I know about the saints.” “Great, Brian, who are the saints?” the teacher asked. Brian answered, “The saints are the ones who let the light shine through.”

The ones who let the light shine through. And that is what is printed around the small stained glass piece in my office. Saints let the light shine through. Well, that got me to thinking about the light shining into St. Stephen’s. We have a jewel box of a church. When we gather for worship here, many physical reminders of the mystical communion of Saints surround us. When we sing “For all the saints,” we sing of those who in their time have let the light shine through. In our patron window, above the choir loft, we remember St. Stephen, and St. Peter, and St. Paul. In the Annunciation window, behind the clergy, we remember St. Mary. In the baptism of Jesus window, along the right side of the nave, we remember St. John the Baptist. Toward the rear of the church, we have the tapestry of St. Francis. These are all great saints of the church who have let the light shine through. The light of God. They are ones who have given us more than a glimpse of the possibility of good in all human life – life directed towards God – life lived in grateful response to God.

Well, thinking about saints and exploring the beautiful stained glass in the church, I started wondering how we at St. Stephen's had been blessed with such beauty. I took my own tour of the church, looked at each window, and read the memorial plaques. And then it hit me. The saints who let the light shine through are not just the great saints depicted in the windows. The saints who let the light shine through are also those who let enough of the light shine through that those who knew them, loved them enough to have given a window in their memory.

So the patron window commemorates William and Florence Brown and William and Anna Bradley. The Resurrection window remembers Martha and Frank Shore and Gertrude and Edward Sparling. The Ascension window is in memory of Anna May and Charles Reid and Ella and John Christie. The windows along this side of the church are in memory of Helen Clark Park, Anna Ingebrigtsen, Alice Ganiats, Peter Buchter, Harold Stanley Summerlin, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Roberts, Orrin B. Pitkin, and William and Martha Haley. Along the chapel side, the windows are in memory of Kenneth Detlink, Mr. and Mrs. James Boyd, Julia Eva Gober Powell, Arthur B. Johnson, William Aden Powell, Lt. Cdr. Reuben Hunt, William H. Shipley, and Alice Herzog. In the bride's room the windows remember Ruth and Russell Gilwee, William and Martha Haley. All of these let the light shine through in their time. They are long gone now, and yet we live surrounded by their witness – surrounded by those who let the light shine through – surrounded by saints.

And it's not only the windows given in people's memory. We have memorial doors given because George Goerl, Nels Munson, and William and Mary Effinger let the light shine through. We have stained glass windows in the narthex because Katherine and William McDonald and Amelia and Henry Arends let the light shine through. We have crosses, candles, and chapel and sanctuary furnishings because Paul Carrington Henshaw, Emily Marie Mosher, Fr. Corwin Calavan, William D. Preston, James S. Bancroft and many others let the light shine through. We have a beautiful garden outside the entrance of the church because Dee Seifert let the light shine through. We have a columbarium because Harvey Milton Mayer and Pearl Austin Mayer let the light shine through. The elevator tower stands because Anne and Neville Long let the light shine through.

Our new labyrinth and prayer garden remembers Jacquie Trutner, Cal Dausman, and Sarah Hacker, all of whom let the light shine through. The cross that reminds us of God's victory over death in Jesus graces this church because Ralph and Jan With let the light shine through.

When we hear the word saint, we might think only of the great and the spectacular, or perhaps even the unusual. But to my mind, we are surrounded by saints, even today, living saints. Saints are those who are not striving so much to fulfill the ideals of our culture – looking good, feeling good, and making good. Saints strive for the simpler virtues of the reign of God – being good and doing good. However, I don't want anyone to leave here today thinking that it is a bad thing to want to look good, to feel good and to make good. We just want to make sure that we don't stop there. That we are striving to be good and to do good.

John Bell of the Iona Community on a windswept island off the west coast of Scotland – one of the thin places where the holy and the earthly are met, wrote this about saints in a contemporary hymn:
“The strangest of saints, the simplest of souls,
The saddest of all the earth's rejected,
Are chosen to be the people in whose lives
The goodness of God can be detected.”

The goodness of God can be detected in acts of generosity, in loving human kindness, in caring for the least, the lost, and the last. The goodness of God can be detected in people who reach out to those who are different, who embrace and include those who are outcast. In our prayers to day we will pray the names of parishioners who died in the past year. We will also have a chance to pray the names of our departed loved ones, family, and friends. Each name brings forth a memory. Perhaps that memory will be of a person who knew that they were loved by God, and tried to live as if they knew it. Someone in whom the goodness of God could be detected; someone who let the light shine through. These are our saints.

So this is not just the day for the heroes, the window saints, the marquis players. This is the day for all of us, saints who from time to time catch a glimpse of God's love, calling us by name, and willing to try – to try – to live day by day, remembering that it is God's world we live in and God who walks with us come what may. That is what it means to be a saint in whom the goodness of God can be detected – one who lets the light shine through.

Today we cooperate with God to make some new saints. Today, parents and godparents, family and friends, and all of us bring Maximo Von Vacano-Shafer, Charles Joel Schirmer, Calvin James Schirmer, Teague Andrew Wiegand, and Reese Charlotte Wiegand to the waters of baptism. Today begins a life of discipleship to our Lord Jesus for these five beloved children of God. Their parents and godparents and all who love them have brought them here with the greatest of hopes, and in the best of faith. We pray that for each one of them, the goodness of God may be detected in **our** lives – we who have said “we will” to that big question during the baptismal rite – “will you who witness these promises do all in your power to support these persons in their new life in Christ?” Who knows what will become of them. Who knows what they will become, what they will accomplish. But whatever they do, wherever they go, whoever they become – we pray that in them, and in their lives, the goodness of God may be detected. We pray that they, in their generation, will let the light of God's love shine through.

All Saints'.
All of us?
Saints?
Yeah!