

“Calling on the Saints”
Psalm 34
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All Saints Day
November 1, 2020

The day after I got out of jail back in 2007, the late Rev. Marian Bascom called me and asked me to lunch. I was worried. I had only been in Baltimore for a few years and our relationship was new. Though he had taken to calling me “young buck,” which I had interpreted as a sign of affection, he had also leveled a few critiques my way. One time after a sermon kind of flopped, he offered a one sentence post-mortem as we shook hands at the door. “Partner,” he said, “I missed the assignment.” As I sat down at the fine restaurant in Cross Keys that day in 2007, my anxiety only sharpened as I realized that seated with him was the Rev. Dr. Arnold Howard, pastor of Enon Baptist Church. I got a lump in my throat. Was I about to be dressed down by Rev. Bascom, one of the iconic leaders of Baltimore Civil Rights struggle, a leader whom I revered and whose blessing I probably coveted more than I let on.

I had seen Rev. Bascom chastise my colleagues, politely, but directly. “There was too much blood today in the hymnody,” he once told a musician following an ecumenical worship service. A few of his Baptist colleagues protested - “What’s the matter, Rev. Bascom, you don’t believe the blood of Jesus saves?” “We’ve had enough blood in our time don’t you think,” he said, calling his heavily titled colleague by his first name.

Trapped now in the restaurant, I fidgeting in my seat. Rev. Bascom leaned over the table, and looking me square in the eye, said - “I’m worried about your soul.” “It’s not good enough!” I thought to myself. But Rev. Bascom had something else in mind. “I know what it’s like to be arrested,” he said. “I know what it’s like to act on your faith. Arnold and I are here to say we love you. And we are with you.” The next time I was arrested, on a bitter cold and wet February night at 2 in the morning, an 80-something year-old Marian Bascom was there with me. So was my mother, shivering in the cold.

It’s All Saints Day and I could care less about those who have been canonized by the Mother Church. It’s not that I’m not personally inspired by Francis of Assisi or the ecstatic experiences of St. Teresa, or the sacrifice of Bishop Romero. I am, deeply. It’s just that the people who have shaped me the most are much closer. I’m more like the Black artist I saw on a NY Times spread reflecting what people have learned in the last four years. She stood defiant and resolved, clutching a 4X6 photo of her older family members in her hands. “I stand with my elders,” her quote said. That’s what the past four years have taught her.

In the 16th century, the Protestant Reformers decided that the Catholic Church had gotten sainthood a little out of hand. Pushing the need for miracles and other kinds of tests to set people apart as super human - that was a mistake, they thought. Saints are not always miraculous or even heroic; they are the faithful - the ones who fulfill their own callings in life, whatever that may be. The great cloud of witnesses spoken about in the book of Hebrews, connected to us in life and in death through the miraculous grace of God.

The Psalmist speaks of the protection and joy that comes from faith. So often I have read this as a kind of admonishment - to seek the Lord more than I do, to trust God more than I do, to stand in awe of the Lord (the better translation of 'fearing the Lord'), more than I do. But this week I've been remembering those saints, remembering their faith. Remembering those who I have known by name, with whom I have exalted the name of the Lord together in worship, in the words of the Psalmist. The faithful who actually delivered people I've known from their fears, who actually cried out to God and were heard, who actually lacked nothing - as far as I could tell - because they had tasted and seen that the Lord is good. They found happiness in the midst of some extremely unhappy times and I had a chance to see it in them. Seeing faith in their lives, opened the door to faith in my own.

As we enter this week of expectation and anxiety, I'm holding onto these saints. I'm standing with my elders. Those who have fought the fight for dignity and freedom. Those who have removed the scales from the eyes of their generations - enough to move you and me in the direction of healing and wholeness for all people and for the land. Those who have stood fast in times of persecution and pain believing that while they may not get to the promised land, their efforts would make it possible for those still to come.

We are still connected to them. And we need their energy and love and guidance and direction in this moment in time.

I think the Reformers got it right on this count, but sometimes they overreached. One of my professors in seminary confessed his own uninformed slandering of Catholic practice of praying to the saints. "As Protestants, we don't believe in praying to any saints," he told his Catholic friend. "We look at your prayers to Mary and the rest as idolatry. We pray only to Jesus." His friend offered a gentle correction. "If you ever needed support from me for anything that you experienced in life, do you believe that you could call on me to pray for you?" "Of course," my professor said. "I know I could ask you and you would pray for me." "Then why," his friend asked, "is it so hard to understand why I would call on Mary or someone else who is part of the mystical communion of the church to pray for me as well?" That great cloud of witnesses watches over us when we are doing God's work. Their love is present and available.

I lean on those saints all the time. My grandmother who defied the patriarchy and her own mother to get the education she deserved and too many members of this

church to count. Those of this church like Robin Coblentz who reminded me early in my pastorate that life is too short to miss the humor in everything. Catherine Marshall who taught me that growing old wasn't for sissies. John deHoff, though his complaints that the church wasn't doing its job drove me crazy, his idea of studying the spirit scientifically has never left my brain as one of the many possibilities that we have yet to know or understand. Carl Taylor who taught me that you can travel to war zones and write books and learn new things at age 90. David Mock who taught me how generosity is a joy not a duty. Yvette Matthews who taught me never to underestimate what God can do with you. Murphy Davis who showed me the true nature of the Eucharist a year ago and allowed me to return the favor a week before she joined that mystical communion. And Mrs. Dorothy Bascom who I tried to bless in her final days only to discover that God had sent me to her bedside to receive a blessing. There are too many names to count which is why the knowledge that they are still with us, cheering us on in whatever crazy, mystical way that might be is the thing that I lean on to keep me going on days when I'd rather not.

I get the sense that there are more of those days for more of us through this pandemic. More of us are finding it hard to do anything, accomplish anything, motivate, accomplish. There's a word for this kind of listlessness - acedia. It's a spiritual word that the monks used as far back as the 5th century to describe the emotion that inevitably overtook monastic life after they had overcome all the other challenges or temptations connected with their vocation. The monk feels "such bodily listlessness and yawning hunger as though he were worn by a long journey or a prolonged fast" John Cassian wrote in the early 5th century. "Next he glances about and sighs that no one is coming to see him. Constantly in and out of his cell, he looks at the sun as if it were too slow in setting." The early monastics included acedia as one of the main realities against which they struggled with in life. It's peppered all through the literature of the Middle Ages in the emotional vocabulary of the time. And here we are in 2020, living a lot like monks, experiencing some similar challenges.¹

A few of those monks offered various methods of resisting or combating acedia. Mostly, their advice seems to be accepting that this emotional state of listlessness was a part of the spiritual struggle. Putting one foot in front of the other seems to be the core of some of the best advice. Accept your emotional state and the fact that like all emotional states, it won't stay. It will pass.

But as I can't help but connect my own perseverance to the saints. They are the cheering squad that keeps me moving when I don't feel like it. They are the ones whose voices I hear whispering, "accept the assignment," "you already have everything you need to fulfill your calling," "you are enough." The fact of their lives is the proof of

¹ Beth Daly, "Acedia: the lost name for the emotion we're all feeling right now," *The Conversation*, article pulled on November 1, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/acedia-the-lost-name-for-the-emotion-were-all-feeling-right-now-144058>

our faith and the function it serves to support a life of meaning, of joy through loss, challenge, and injustice.

In a moment we will celebrate the Eucharist together. Some of my colleagues aren't really sure if what we are doing here together is really legit. Pre-pandemic, I would have told you we all needed to be in the same room, Michele or I needed to officiate and break the bread. But the more we've done this together the more I've wondered if this kind of mystical communion - connection across time and space - is actually closer to what some of our theologians had in mind when they shared what they believed about the Eucharistic feast. The magic is not in what happens to the bread and the wine, our Reformed founders argued against the teachings of the Catholic Church. But this meal is way more than just symbolic, they said, against the teachings of Baptists and others who got rid of all sacraments altogether. What's special is that in this meal, together, the Spirit lifts our hearts into the heavenly presence of Christ and with believers of every time and place. It is true communion with Christ and all who love him, who hold fast to his teaching to love God and love everyone including yourself, just as God loves us.

In the runup to this election week I find myself surprised at myself for not being called to preach a rip-roaring democracy-is-at-stake, go-to-the-polls sermon. But you know, I've been preaching a version of that sermon for the past 4 years. Many of you have already voted. If you haven't, I know you will. Some of you are working the polls. God bless you. My daughter and I will be in Pennsylvania all day on Tuesday, on vacation, going door to door engaging the political process for our chosen candidate in a way that would make our Reformed theological saints proud.

But this week I feel the need to prepare us not for the week but for a season - a season of struggling for God's justice. A season of repairing the tears to our human fabric from generations of white supremacy and unilateral power that abuses those most vulnerable. A season of struggling against misogyny, and inequality, and hate in all its forms. A season of struggle and meaning that nonetheless doesn't have to wait until all is well to see that joy is possible and that God is supremely good.

The saints have shown us that way. I thank God for all those who have walked among you and me and showed us the way of justice and love and given us the faith to keep us from fear, cynicism, or resignation, and I pray that one day, I might be granted the privilege to join them in cheering on those who fight that good fight today.