

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

November 5, 2023 – ALL SAINTS'/ALL SOULS' SUNDAY

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: *"Would Y'all be a Saint?"**

First Lesson	Revelation 7:9-17	(St. John is given a vision of God's heavenly throne)
Psalter	Psalms 34:1-10, 22	(Praise for the Lord's greatness and help in troubled times)
Second Lesson	1 John 3:1-3	(We are God's children; He loves us all)
Gospel	St. Matthew 5:1-12	(Jesus teaches the Beatitudes)

So, just wondering, did any of you dress up for Halloween? [Yes? What were you dressed as?] For Halloween, kids and adults alike tend to “dress up” in costumes and put on masks to hide who they really are. Historically, the disguises worn on “All Hallow’s Eve” were supposed to fool the demons and other dark forces roaming the planet on that fateful night. The idea was that good Christians would be left alone by evil spirits if they dressed to look like they were part of Satan’s army. (And judging by the blood-spattered, gory, creepy, and macabre decorations I’ve seen on some people’s houses, I think they are part of Satan’s army!)

But things have certainly changed since the Middle Ages. I doubt many demons were scared away on this year’s Halloween by roving bands of Barbies and Kens, Spider Men, mini-Taylor Swifts, Wednesday Addams look-alikes, or Super Mario Brothers.

For some of us, the “dressing up” didn’t stop with Saturday night. We also “dressed up” to come to church this morning. We exchanged our Saturday night “sinner” outfit for our Sunday “saint” costume. We tend to believe there’s a divide between our outward appearance and our spiritual condition. As long as we *look like* respectable Christians, there’s no need for anyone to know about the darkness in our hearts or the filth in our minds. Yet, the Body of Christ should always require a two-pronged greeting: “Good Morning Saints! Good Morning Sinners!” That covers the paradox of who we are before God, since every one of us is both a sinner and a saint.

One of my southern relatives—her name was Arbutus—used to make requests using a rather unique vocabulary. She’d ask, “Would y’all be a saint and bring me that sweater?” Or, “Would y’all be a saint and carry those dishes to the kitchen?” Each of Arbu’s appeals gave us the opportunity to register as “saints.” But is that all there is to being a saint? Would we be real saints if all we had to do was run a few helpful errands? Isn’t some intensely deep commitment, impeccable spirituality, stunning charisma, or brutal martyrdom required?

We all know there are true saints in our midst this morning. Can’t you feel their presence? We have only to recognize and celebrate them. But this is our problem. We may overlook them because real saints don’t stand out as such. In today’s Gospel, Jesus identifies the revealing qualities of a true saint:

Those who are poor in spirit, and those who mourn. They are those who hunger for righteousness and are merciful. They are meek and pure in heart. They are the peacemakers and the persecuted. These saints do not proudly strut their achievements. They don’t insist on being the best, require trumpeting about their deeds, or demand special recognition from others. True saints slip under the radar. They are the individuals who give without compensation; love without reservation; and sacrifice without expectation. People who give, love, and sacrifice, without ever wanting recognition or recompense, are those who qualify as saints within the Body of Christ.

All Saints' Sunday is the one day when we should especially make a concerted effort to recognize and celebrate "For all the saints, who from their labors rest . . ." These are the saints who have gone on before us, centuries ago, whose legacy of love continues on—saints such as St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Francis, St. Joan of Arc, St. Theresa of Calcutta, and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton—all saints appropriately identified and honored with a capital "S" in the capital "C" Church.

The "sainting process" through which the Roman Catholic Church runs all potential candidates is rigorous and time-consuming. Candidates must pass a strict series of tests. These saints may be canonized, but even that process cannot make them sanitized. None of the great saints were completely sinless, for Jesus Christ alone is without sin.

So why does the Church make room for unsanitized saints? To be a sinful saint seems to be the biblical standard: St. Peter denied Christ three times; St. Paul persecuted Christians and cheered at St. Stephen's stoning; St. Augustine in his youth was spoiled, promiscuous, and rebellious, while St. Aquinas was gluttonous, rude, and abusive. Even St. Francis went through a decadent, war-minded phase.

And when we read Hebrews 11, the great "faith" chapter that illustrates examples of trust and obedience by the "communion of saints," we find that every member of that blessed communion is portrayed with warts. In some ways, the saints in Hebrews 11 resemble more a "Rogues' Gallery" than a Pantheon of Saints. That's because every Christian "saint" is, before God, a "sinner." In fact, the Old Testament tends to parade the faults and foibles of the patriarchs and matriarchs, rather than hiding them. In the Bible, we see saints in their skivvies, with no clever costume to cover over their flawed humanity.

On Halloween, we put on masks, pretending to be someone we are not. The way Christians reclaim our identity on All Saints' Day is by stripping off every mask, exposing—both to God and to one another—who we really are, what we truly care about, and whom we genuinely love. If All Hallows' Eve is all about masking, All Saints' Day is all about unmasking. It's about not being afraid of others knowing our shortcomings, of being genuinely open about the trials we are experiencing, and the ways in which we fail to be the best disciples of Christ. Such vulnerability, in an atmosphere of love and trust, invites sympathy and prayer from our fellow sinful saints.

Saints do wear their hearts on their sleeves, even as they may evidence their weariness in well-doing. Saints do wear crowns of suffering and long-suffering, and at times, even crowns of martyrdom. Saints do mess up, and bleed, and fail. But whatever they do, saints always love others with the gracious mercy and generous acceptance with which Christ loves us.

This Sunday in the Church gives us an opportunity to celebrate those saints among us here at St. John's, who keep the heart of the Body of Christ beating, and who keep the Body of Christ warm, vital, and alive for the world to see. Today is an occasion to lift up the saints and angels in our midst: Those who fill the outreach basket; clean the church bathrooms and kitchen; mow the cemetery lawn; provide goodies and set up for coffee hour; do the office work and print the bulletin; replace lightbulbs, order supplies, and pay the bills.

They visit our shut-ins and bring soup to the sick. They take part in Bible Study and contribute turkey dinners for Steeple to People. They help us sing, and are greeters, lectors, crucifers, acolytes, altar servers, ushers, and counters. They are members of the Vestry. They set up and clean up for Communion. They fill the candles, polish the brass, and launder the altar linens.

These are our parish saints, along with those of you parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, who spend extra time and effort on the children in your lives. Along with you seniors who do a lot for your retirement communities, and our younger members who are changing the world for the better, simply by being themselves.

In fact, there are potential saints everywhere. Perhaps we need to prophesy some saints into existence: Such as, the checker who makes sure your carton of eggs isn't cracked and asks if you need help carrying your groceries to the car ... "*You're a saint!*" Or the nurse at your doctor's office who smiles, gives you friendly eye-contact, and actually cares how you're doing ... "*You're a saint!*" And then, there's that driver who lets you go first at a four-way stop ... "*You're a saint!*"

Jesus promised in Matthew 32:12 that "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." Saints are not superior to the rest of us. They don't commit fewer sins than we do. They won't get a better place in heaven than we will. Saints are simply men, women, and young people who wholeheartedly manifest Jesus' mandate of love and service. True saints are sinners, but they are forgiven sinners who humble themselves, care for others, and don't concern themselves with outcomes or honors. They are those who, with each passing day, are purposely and prayerfully making every effort to be more like Jesus Christ. That is what makes them holy.

So, as my relative from Virginia used to say, "Would y'all be a saint?"¹ ... *Would you?*

Let us pray:

Dear God, we don't aspire to see our faces on gilded icons or to be glorified in the company of Your holy angels. We just need your grace in this life to keep on being faithful followers of Your Son. And please remind us often of the hope of life everlasting that is ours because of His Resurrection and Ascension. Then, at the close of our lives, take us to be with You. This we ask in Christ's Holy Name. *Amen.*

^{*} Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 1 November 2015, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. Leonard Sweet, "Would You Be a Saint?" [Sermons.com](https://sermons.com/sermon/would-you-be-a-saint/1361001), 27 October 2015 < <https://sermons.com/sermon/would-you-be-a-saint/1361001> > 30 October 2023. Used with permission.