

The Stewardship of the Saints

John Wilkinson

Third Presbyterian Church

November 5, 2017

I Thessalonians 2:9-13 and Matthew 23:1-12

Eternal God, neither death nor life can separate us from your love. Grant that we may serve you faithfully here on earth and in heaven rejoice with all your saints who ceaselessly proclaim your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

We remember: Mary Forrest Garber, Joyce Elaine Wunderlich, Ethel Ann Moden, Elizabeth Winter Montello, Carolyn Scowden Kerr, Robert Tripp Norton, Paul W. Griffith, Pauline Culver Anderson, Marlene Kron Duerr, Barbara Carpenter Grace, Lorraine Helen Nitzman, John Wurlitzer Thoman, Harry R. Beilfuss, Richard G. Crawford, Grace Long Gaston, Patricia May Shaw, Sally Wheaton Gillan, Harry R. Nickles, The Rev. Charles Stratton, The Rev. James Marlett, Lucile E. Rice, Joanne Potter Beale, Elizabeth McKee, Mary Sue Jack.

The well-known Baptist preacher of an earlier era, Carlyle Marney, offered a creative image that continues to inspire me. In a famous lecture Marney used a house as a metaphor for a person. There are different rooms in the house that is you, he said. There is a living room where you welcome guests, a kitchen and dining room for eating, a bedroom where you sleep. There is even a basement where you store your trash!

If you step out onto the front lawn, Marney said, you see something you didn't even know was there: a balcony. And on the balcony are some people, the people who have exerted good and positive and gracious influences in your life. "Walk outside and look up and see who's up there on your balcony looking down at you," he suggested. "Wave to them. They are your saints." That's what we do today, on this All Saints Sunday – we wave to our saints, our balcony people.

I would invite us to close our eyes and find a place of quiet for just a moment. In the silence imagine your balcony, and those who would be on it. Imagine yourself waving to them...

Who was there? A spouse? Your parents, or grandparents? As I mentioned a few weeks ago, I continue to encounter boxes of things left when we hurriedly emptied my parents' home some three years ago. I recently opened a box of photographs, from my father's side of the family,

some 60, 70, 80 years old. We tend to lock in our parents and grandparents at certain ages, but these photographs showed my dad's parents in their young adult phases, and my dad as a kid and a young man, images I'd never seen, giving added depth and texture to my balcony people.

There are others: coaches who encouraged me, teachers who pushed me. There are ministers who influenced me, of course, long ago and recently, just as I presume there are those who influenced you in the directions you headed.

But it is more than personal influence, as much as that matters. Your balcony people, our saints, changed the world for good, on grand scales and in small, simple ways.

I attended a memorial service in Indianapolis in August. At the reception, a woman approached me and asked me if I was John Wilkinson. It depends, I replied. She told me who she was. Thank goodness I remembered her after 30 years. She was an elder of the church where I served as a seminary intern. Her name was Charlotte. I remember Charlotte fondly. And I remember her mother, Helen, who raised a family under challenging circumstances and served faithfully as a church elder. What I remember most about Helen was her unsung work with a program we ran for young women who were mothers at ages 15 or 16 or 17. Helen would come to the church and take the young women and their babies to the doctor for appointments, or to the store for diapers, or just sit with them and let them know that things would be OK and that there was a community, in the form of this saintly one, who cared for them, who would not judge but rather who would support.

Helen's name may be on a plaque on a wall somewhere, or not, but she is on my balcony because of her humility and faithful service.

Yours will be yours and mine will be mine. But we do well to remember them, wave to them, rely on them, lean into them.

We equate the word saint with holiness. I don't want to lose that connotation; what I want to do is redefine the term, holy. It's not so much a person who works miracles, performs dramatic healings and the like.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonian church about his ministry: "As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God..." I know that for some of us the father imagery is not helpful. But what about those qualities – urging and encouraging and pleading, particularly encouraging.

On my balcony is a college professor, not a church-goer, in fact, who was kind of bemused I ended up doing what I do. But he instilled in me lessons about communicating and critical thinking that have stuck with me all these years.

Urging. Pleading. Encouraging. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus denounces the people typically understood to be holy. We should remember that. "They do all their deeds to be seen by others." Jesus redefines what holy is, and in the process, helps us understand what a true saint looks like: "The greatest among you will be servant. And all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Service. Humility. Yours will be yours and mine will be mine, balcony people, that is, the saints. But we do share some in common in this place, in our common story. Their names might be on the pews, or on plaques on the walls, or engrossed in stained glass. But more likely, over our 190 years of history, they taught a Sunday school class or drove a van-full of teenagers to a retreat or washed dishes on a Saturday morning or stuffed envelopes or licked stamps or led a difficult discussion or quietly sat at a bedside holding a hand or humming a hymn.

We read a list today, and we remember. We search our own memory banks, and we remember. Some are gone too sadly. Some are gone too soon. Some lived long and fully and well. We miss them all.

And yet...We walk out on the front yard and there they are, our balcony people. We wave to them. We sing, with gusto, and perhaps with a tear in our eye, "For All the Saints." It may be sentimental and nostalgic. It is not, at least to me, maudlin or even remotely depressing. It is true to our faith. It inspires, it fortifies, it comforts, each of us and all of us.

"O blessed communion, fellowship divine. We feebly struggle; they in glory shine. Yet all are one in Thee, for all are thine. Alleluia. Alleluia" Amen.