

The Saints Among Us
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church
All Saint's Day, BCP Readings
Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10, 13-14; Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17; Matthew 5:1-12
November 1, 2007

I'd like to tell you the story of one very special saint, a woman—a woman born in the early 1900's to poor Polish immigrants. She was the eldest, followed quickly by a sister and a brother. When she was five, her mother died from the swine flu epidemic. She had to grow up in a hurry, taking care of her younger siblings and helping her father in his small store. Her father eventually remarried, and six more children followed, 3 boys and 3 girls.

She grew up in a Polish neighborhood, attending church and attending school. She liked school, and graduated from eighth grade. She would have like to continue her schooling and even become a nun, but she was not allowed. As the eldest, the family needed her income. So she went to work as a maid. Most of her income was turned over to her father; she was able to retain a small portion, which she often shared by buying gifts for her sisters and brothers.

The years passed by; she dated a few young men. Family dictated, though, that she marry someone Catholic and Polish. Eventually, she met and married someone Catholic and Polish. It was the Great Depression by then, but her husband was fortunate to have work. In time, a son was born. They saved their money and eventually bought a house—one with a dining room and a fireplace, her dream house.

But it was not to be. Soon there was reduction in income, and the house became unaffordable. It was sold, and with what was left, a smaller house—no dining room, no fireplace—was purchased instead. She cried when she saw the new house—so little and ugly compared to the one she had to leave behind. She vowed that no matter what, she wouldn't lose this house too. So she struck a deal with the bank that the payments would never exceed a certain amount, no matter how long it took her to pay off the house. She never missed a payment.

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Life continued on. Though her husband often changed jobs, there was always enough at least to pay the bills. He even took a job in Alaska, sending home money. He also held jobs as a bus driver and developed film in a darkroom he built in the basement. To help out, she cleaned houses, taking her son along with her.

But settling down was not in her husband's blood. Sometime around the time his son turned nine, he left. Her husband visited infrequently and contributed only sporadically to the household. If she and her son were to make it, she would have to return to work full-time.

She developed film in the basement darkroom and took a job in an envelope factory. Money was tight, but always stretched to cover what was needed. As her son grew and expressed an interest in college, she sought and obtained a higher paying job at the RCA factory to make sure that he could go to school. Some relatives did not see the need for all this education and stated so. But education was important, she knew. Her son would be the first in the family to attend and graduate from college.

Her son married right out of college and this worried her—he was so young! Not even a steady job yet! But, they were in love...and he was so happy. Two grandchildren followed in the next few years, and eventually 4 great grandchildren, only 3 of whom she got to know before her death at the age of 83.

Her name was Sophia, and she was my grandmother.

* * *

My grandmother's story has always fascinated me; not strictly because of all the hardships she endured—for many have endured far worse. But through it all, she never became bitter and never lost her faith; it sustained her through thick and thin. She never gave up. She

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even eventually earned her high school diploma after she had seen her son through college. I never heard her speak ill of anyone. She never had much—but what she had she gave freely; she was generous with her time, love, praise and her small resources. She always said she was so very blessed—she had her health, until near the very end; she had a large family that cared for one another; she had her son and his family nearby. I remember many simple Sunday dinners in her small kitchen; simple, yet she always managed to make them very special. She taught me many things from cooking to card playing, but most of all, she taught me how to love. Love was her forte, her gift. All who knew her felt it. To her extended family, she was known as “Saint Sophie”.

I daresay many of us know such persons in our lives—faithful, loving persons who show forth Christ in their daily words and actions. But is it really right to call them saints? What exactly is a saint, anyway?

From the early days of the church, the community has remembered and honored those who have shown great faith—often martyrs who died for steadfastly professing Jesus Christ as Lord. They were—and are—held up as examples of heroic faith, so as to inspire the rest of us to fully live out our baptismal covenant. Even before the Christian church became the official faith of the Roman Empire, there were observances of a festival of martyrs, which eventually led to a festival of all saints which was held in the spring. The celebration of a November date for All Saints originated in Ireland, largely to counteract the Celtic holiday of Samhain, a day when the dead walked the earth. This date quickly spread for by the 9th century, the Pope recommended this celebration be embraced by the whole Church.

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As the church grew, it formalized the procedures for recognizing a person as an official 'saint'. And to a degree, that is still true today. In the back of our Lesser Feasts and Fasts book, one can find the procedure for having someone commemorated in the Episcopal Church, and what qualities are looked for in a 'saint': heroic faith, devotion, love, service.

But a saint is more than a person whose biography happens to make into this little black book. Paul regularly spoke of the 'saints' of the church—in Greek, the *hagios*, or the holy ones, of God. Saints, for Paul, were the faithful of the church community—those who have committed themselves to Christ. Through baptism, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, one became a saint in the church. This is God's action—not ours; for God is holy, and only God can create and declare others holy. In Paul's view, the holiness of God's holy ones was God's gift, not something humans earned.

This gift of holiness, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, is present in all of our lives. We bear in our very souls the mark of our Creator, the Holy One. We may not see it or feel it—especially on those days when we fall far short of reflecting the love of Christ into the world. But is it there nonetheless, naming us, encouraging us, claiming us to be a saint of God.

The writer of Ecclesiasticus, Ben Sira, knew about those everyday saints as well: for even as some left behind 'a name so that others declare their praise', it is true that for 'others there is no memory'---no icons painted, no statues carved—though 'their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out'. In other words, their individual deeds may be long forgotten—but the impact of their lives resonates through the ages. Like ripples in a pond, their faithful lives affected all those around them—friends, family, co-workers—and granddaughters.

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So I suppose it is only good and right that my grandmother was lovingly known as 'Saint Sophie'—one of God's holy ones. Her life, difficult as it may have been, gently shaped the lives of those around her, reminding us of the love we are called to live every day. For a saint's life is a life that points toward God—and there can be no greater legacy than that.

So, my fellow holy ones, what legacy will you leave? What will your page in the book of life say about you?

Amen.