

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: Jesus Is Our Head, and We Are Christ's Body
St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore Ohio
November 2, 2025

Dan 7:1-3, 15-18, Eph 1:11-23

There is a small town in southeastern Ohio where there are four Baptist congregations, each with their own preacher. One of the pastors, call him George, was troubled and called a meeting with the other three. George said "Every Sunday we gather with our congregations, and we preach that they should confess their sins, repent, and seek forgiveness from God. Well, I am betting that we need to confess as much as they do, and I want to confess my sin to you."

"Brothers, I confess that every so often I need to buy a big old Cuban cigar and go off by myself to smoke it. I know, it is wrong ... I know that! But it relaxes me, and I feel better after smoking it even though I know it is wrong."

A second preacher, call him Ralph, responded "Well, thank you brother George, I appreciate your sharing. And I also have a sin to confess ... every so often I go buy one of those little bottles ... nips I think they are called ... a nip of Kentucky Bourbon Whiskey and then I go off by myself and sip it. Yes, I know it is wrong, but like George and his cigar, I feel better after drinking my nip. I know it is wrong, but it cheers me up."

The third preacher, Jim, commented "Well, George thank you for being so honest. I confess that I sin from time to time as well. I love to gamble. So, I go two towns away so that nobody knows me, and I play poker in a traveling poker game there. I know it is wrong, but it relaxes me. I don't bet or lose much money, but I do feel better even though I know it is wrong."

Now everybody turned and looked at the fourth man. The fourth preacher, his name was Alan, looked up and said "Well, yes, I am like you. I have a sin to confess ... I know it is wrong, but I love to gossip ... and I just cannot wait until this meeting is over!"

Well, there is not one of us who is not a sinner. We experience grace and forgiveness because our Savior Jesus the Christ took our sins with him to the cross and made atonement for us there.

So, what is all this stuff about All Saints Day ... why are we talking about saints? Brother Alan, sinner that you are, I thought only Catholics, and the Orthodox Church talked about saints.

The word "saint" is derived from a Greek verb (hagiazō) whose basic meaning is "to set apart, "sanctify, " or "make holy." In the history of the Old Testament religion, the idea of holiness or separateness was inherent in the concept of God. God was holy. God was unapproachable in the tabernacle or temple by the ordinary individual, being accessible only to the priests and only under carefully specified conditions. His presence (the Shekinah) dwelled in the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place, the most remote and inaccessible place in the wilderness tabernacle and

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later in the Jerusalem temple. Only the high priest was allowed to stand in God's presence in this area, and then only once a year at Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement).

This sacred place was further separated from the ordinary Jewish worshiper by another room called "the Holy Place," which could be entered only by priests. The intent was to impress upon the people the utter holiness and sacredness and separateness of the God they worshiped, as well as the necessity of their being set apart or sanctified as saints in his service. This sense of Yahweh's separateness from the sins of the people and from the pagan idols of the lands in which they dwelled was at the heart of Jewish Temple monotheism.

This idea of the separateness of God and his people is carried forward in the New Testament. NT authors interpreted God's covenant with Israel through the teachings of Christ. Those who were dedicated to the teachings of Christ were frequently called saints by these writers (e.g., Matt 27:52; Acts 9:13; 26:10; Rev 14:12). Six of Paul's letters to churches are addressed to saints (Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians).

The word "saints" appears in the New Testament 63 times. There it refers to all members of churches who are Christians consecrated to God through Jesus Christ (2 Cor 8:4). (See Dictionary of Theological Terms, Mckim, Second Edition.)

[Only once is the singular word "saint" used. In Philippians 4:21 (NRSV), "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you."]

Saints, in the New Testament, are living individuals who have dedicated themselves to the worship and service of the one true God as revealed through his Son, Jesus Christ. On occasion, when discussing the atonement, Paul differentiates between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, calling the former saints and the latter believers. It was the saints, the holy people of God in the Old Testament, who brought the Messiah and redemption into the world, eventually extending the blessings to the Gentiles. However, Paul addresses the letter to all the Christians in Rome as saints (Rom 1:7) because Gentiles who, as wild olive branches, have been grafted into the stem of Judaism, now share in the full relationship to that plant and are also saints.

We in the church who have dedicated ourselves to the worship of God and service in God's name to others can legitimately be called saints. Yesterday was the day set aside by the church to remember the saints who have gone before us ... All Saints' Day. We remember them because they led us to faith, taught us the faith, modeled the faith for us, and lived the faith throughout their lives.

Saints are distinguished by their faithfulness to God in this life. But what happens to saints when they die? Where are all those saints of the faith who have gone before us?

Saints hope for resurrection. The singular resurrection of Jesus gives the faithful hope that one day we will also be resurrected from death. Jesus calls the saints who have died the children of the resurrection. Jesus identifies them with Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac, all of whom have long

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since died but who are somehow alive to God. God is the God of the living, even those who live beyond their deaths due to the grace of our God.

Christians have differing ideas about resurrection. We know from the Old Testament that ancient Jews did not believe in any sort of life beyond death. When we die, we die body and soul ... so they believed. Towards the end of the Old Testament, we get the notion of resurrection appearing in the book of Daniel. By Jesus' time, the idea of resurrection was widespread in the Jewish faith but not universally believed. The Pharisees believed in resurrection but not the Sadducees.

However, the Jewish notion of resurrection was a resurrection of the entire people of Israel, all at once on the Day of the Lord. That is part of the reason that Jesus' resurrection was so hard for people to accept. Resurrection was not supposed to happen to only one person. It was an event for the entire people, the whole nation of Israel. How could one person have been raised from the dead? There was nothing in the Jewish tradition or faith to support such an idea, or so most thought.

Another wrinkle in the notion of resurrection is that the Jewish people did not distinguish very much between body and spirit and soul. We are a holistic unity, not a collection of parts. So, according to Jewish belief, when we die, all of us dies. We really die! We are mortal and we die, in our entirety, mind, body, spirit, and soul. Many Christians hold the same belief.

I believe that the Bible teaches us that we are with God in our death in the sense that God knows us and remembers us. We might think of it as our names being on the lips of God. We are not forgotten.

These days Christians have a variety of beliefs about death and resurrection. Many believe that at death, our souls are freed from our ailing, diseased, aged, dead bodies. Our soul flies off to heaven to be with God.

These beliefs are due to the influence of Greek philosophers like Plato. It was the Greeks who believed that there was a significant difference between the pure soul, coming from the realms of heaven, and the human body, impure and imperfect. Death frees the pure soul from the impure body.

The Neo-Platonic notion of our pure and immortal soul leaving our dying and decaying body at death and flying to heaven has at least two problems. First God created our bodies as good and very good things, not impure and imperfect. Second, the book of the Revelation to John tells us that God will renew heaven and earth, and that the new heaven will descend into the midst of the new earth ... we don't go to heaven ... in a sense, heaven comes to us.

In the end we shall all see the truth and all such questions shall be settled.

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What is important on this All Saints' Day is that our faith is not just a matter for each of us individually. The faith of those who went before us matters. The faith of those who come after us matters. Our faith matters now for all of us in congregation and in covenant together. Faith is something that extends over the generations.

More than that, the Christian faith extends over the entire globe. Historically Christianity has been most popular in Europe and North Africa, and then in the United States. The spread of Islam greatly diminished Christianity there. And in recent years church congregations have been declining in Europe and in the U. S. That may well be changing, as there are signs of a revival of faith in the northern Hemisphere.

But Christianity is now more popular and numerous in the Southern Hemisphere than in the Northern. Africa and Latin and Central America have seen great growth in the numbers of Christians there, partly as Roman Catholics have left that church to become part of the Christian movement called Pentecostalism, originating in the United States about 125 years ago.

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary annually issues statistics on the state of global Christianity. As of 2025 there are 2.6 billion Christians. Nearly 70 percent of those folks live in the global South (Africa, Asia, and North America). There are more than 750 million Christians now in Africa.

I raise the issue of global Christianity because I want us to be aware that we part of a cosmic and earthly community that extends, through Jesus, back to the beginning and forward to the end of time. More than that Jesus is the head of a body that extends geographically over all the earth.

Which is why we should be concerned about what is happening to that global body. The number of Christians killed for their faith has been falling over the years but now seems to have plateaued and seems likely to increase. North Korea is the country where Christianity is most persecuted, but we have seen the burning of hundreds of churches and the deaths of tens of thousands of Christians in Nigeria. On average a Christian is killed every two hours in Nigeria.

Christians are also persecuted in Somalia, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, Pakistan, Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan ([Source](#))

We need to pray for our brothers and sisters in Nigeria and in all nations in which Christians are persecuted. We need to work in all ways possible for their safety and for their freedom to worship in safety.

Authentic faith is contagious, something you can "catch" from others of the previous generation and can pass on to the next. We can catch it from folks on this continent and increasingly we can catch it from the folks in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. On this All Saints' Sunday, let us resolve to be contagious. Let us resolve to be faithful witnesses who live out our faith and pass it on.

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Prayer:

Let us exalt you, O God as have past generations of saints. Let us exalt you so that the next generation may learn of your wondrous works and your mighty acts and catch the gift of faith. Move us to help our sisters and brothers in the persecuting nations so that they be free from fear and violence. Turn the hearts and minds of their persecutors to non-violence and the peace of your realm. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen